

# Yoga and Christianity: Are They Compatible? – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

*Michael Gleghorn takes a hard look at yoga to determine if the practice is compatible with Christian living. After examining the spiritual underpinnings of yoga and the relationship of the physical aspects to the spiritual teaching, he concludes that Christians seeking physical exercise would be wise to consider techniques other than yoga.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## What is Yoga?

What is yoga? For many in the West, yoga is simply a system of physical exercise, a means of strengthening the body, improving flexibility, and even healing or preventing a variety of bodily ailments. But if we inquire into the history and philosophy of yoga we discover that “much more than a system of physical exercise for health, Yoga is . . . [an] ancient path to spiritual growth.” It is a path enshrined in much of the sacred literature of India.<sup>{1}</sup> Thus, if we truly want a better understanding of yoga, we must dig beneath the surface and examine the historical roots of the subject.

Before we begin digging, however, we must first understand what the term “yoga” actually means. “According to tradition, ‘yoga’ means ‘union,’ the union...of the finite ‘jiva’ (transitory self) with the infinite’...Brahman’ (eternal Self).”<sup>{2}</sup> “Brahman” is a term often used for the Hindu concept of “God,” or Ultimate Reality. It is an impersonal, divine substance that “pervades, envelops, and underlies everything.”<sup>{3}</sup> With this in mind, let’s briefly look at three key texts that will help us chart the origin and development

of yoga within India.

It appears that one can trace both the practice and goal of yoga all the way back to the *Upanishads*, probably written between 1000-500 B.C.{4} One *Upanishad* tells us: “Unite the light within you with the light of Brahman.”{5} Clearly, then, the goal of yoga (i.e. union with Brahman) is at least as old as the *Upanishads*.

In addition, the word “yoga” often appears in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a classic Hindu text possibly written as early as the fifth century B.C.{6} In chapter 6, Krishna declares: “Thus joy supreme comes to the Yogi . . . who is one with Brahman, with God.”{7}

Finally, in about A.D. 150, the yogi Patanjali systematized yoga into eight distinct “limbs” in his *Yoga Sutras*. These eight limbs are like a staircase, supposedly leading the yogi from ignorance to enlightenment. In order, the eight limbs are: *yama* (self-control), *niyama* (religious observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), *pratyahara* (sense control), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (deep contemplation), and *samadhi* (enlightenment){8} It’s interesting to note that postures and breathing exercises, often considered to be the whole of yoga in the West, are steps three and four along Patanjali’s “royal” road to union with Brahman.

We see that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline deeply rooted in the religion of Hinduism. This being so, we may honestly wonder whether it’s really wise for a Christian to be involved in yoga practice. Next, we’ll continue our discussion by examining some of the important doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity.

## **Yoga and Christianity: What are the**

# Differences?

Many people today (including some Christians) are taking up yoga practice. We'll later consider whether yoga philosophy can truly be separated from yoga practice, but we must first establish that there are crucial doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity. Let's briefly look at just a few of these.

First, yoga and Christianity have very different concepts of God. As previously stated, the goal of yoga is to experience union with "God." But what do yogis mean when they speak of "God," or Brahman? Exactly what are we being encouraged to "unite" with? Most yogis conceive of "God" as an impersonal, spiritual substance, coextensive with all of reality. This doctrine is called pantheism, the view that everything is "God." It differs markedly from the theism of biblical Christianity. In the Bible, God reveals Himself as the personal Creator of the universe. God is the Creator; the universe, His creation. The Bible maintains a careful distinction between the two.[{9}](#)

A second difference between yoga and Christianity concerns their views of man. Since yoga philosophy teaches that everything is "God," it necessarily follows that man, too, is "God." Christianity, however, makes a clear distinction between God and man. God is the Creator; man is one of His creatures. Of course man is certainly unique, for unlike the animals he was created in the image of God.[{10}](#) Nevertheless, Christianity clearly differs from yoga in its unqualified insistence that God and man are distinct.

Finally, let's briefly consider how yoga and Christianity differently conceive man's fundamental problem, as well as its solution. Yoga conceives man's problem primarily in terms of ignorance; man simply doesn't realize that he is "God." The solution is enlightenment, an experience of union with "God." This solution (which is the goal of yoga) can only be reached

through much personal striving and effort. Christianity, however, sees man's primary problem as sin, a failure to conform to both the character and standards of a morally perfect God. Man is thus alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. The solution is Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."[\[11\]](#) Through Jesus' death on the cross, God reconciled the world to Himself.[\[12\]](#) He now calls men to freely receive all the benefits of His salvation through faith in Christ alone. Unlike yoga, Christianity views salvation as a free gift. It can only be received; it can never be earned.

Clearly, Christianity and yoga are mutually exclusive viewpoints. But is every kind of yoga the same? Isn't there at least one that's exclusively concerned with physical health and exercise? Next, we'll take a closer look at hatha yoga, the one most often believed to be purely physical in nature.

## What Is Hatha Yoga?

Here we've learned that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline rooted in a belief system that is utterly incompatible with Christianity. But is this true of *all* yoga? Isn't *hatha* yoga simply concerned with physical development and good health?

Hatha yoga is primarily concerned with two things: *asana* (physical postures) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises). But it's important to realize that both *asana* and *pranayama* also play a significant role in Patanjali's *raja* (or "royal") yoga. In the traditional eight "limbs" of Patanjali's system, *asana* and *pranayama* are limbs three and four. What then is the relationship of hatha to raja yoga?

Former yoga practitioner Dave Fetcho states that yoga postures "evolved as an integral part of Raja . . . Yoga."[\[13\]](#) He points out that the author of the famous handbook, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, "presents Hatha . . . solely and exclusively

for the attainment of Raja Yoga.”{14} He also cites a French yoga scholar who claims, “the sole purpose of . . . Hatha Yoga is to suppress physical obstacles on the . . . Royal path of Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga is therefore called ‘the ladder to Raja Yoga.’”{15} Fetcho concurs, noting that the physical postures are “specifically designed to manipulate consciousness...into Raja Yoga’s consummate experience of *samadhi*: undifferentiated union with the primal essence of consciousness.”{16} These statements should make it quite clear that hatha, or physical, yoga has historically been viewed simply as a means of aiding the yogi in attaining enlightenment, the final limb of raja yoga.

This is further confirmed by looking at Iyengar yoga, possibly the most popular form of hatha yoga in the U.S. The Web site for the Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco states: “BKS Iyengar studies and teaches yoga as unfolded in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali [sic] and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika among other classical texts. Thus Asana, or postures, are taught as one of the eight limbs . . . of yoga defined by Patanjali.”{17} In fact, the ultimate goal of Iyengar hatha yoga is precisely the same as that of Patanjali’s raja yoga.{18} Both aim to experience union with “God,” Brahman, or universal consciousness.

If all these things are so, it seems increasingly apparent that hatha yoga may ultimately involve its practitioners in much more than physical exercise. Although it may not be obvious at first, the ultimate goal of hatha is the same as every other form of yoga: union of the self with an impersonal, universal consciousness. We must remember that the Bible never exhorts Christians to seek such an experience. If anything, it warns us of the potential dangers in doing so. Next, we’ll consider whether yoga practice might, in fact, be dangerous—and why.

## Can Yoga be Harmful?

Despite its touted health benefits, there are numerous warnings in authoritative yoga literature which caution that yoga can be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful if not practiced correctly.

For instance, Swami Prabhavananda warns of the potentially dangerous physical effects that might result from yoga breathing exercises: “Unless properly done, there is a good chance of injuring the brain. And those who practice such breathing without proper supervision can suffer a disease which no known science or doctor can cure.”[\[19\]](#)

In addition, many yogis warn that yoga practice can endanger one’s sanity. In describing the awakening of “kundalini” (coiled serpent power) Gopi Krishna records his own experience as follows: “It was variable for many years, painful, obsessive...I have passed through almost all the stages of...mediumistic, psychotic, and other types of mind; for some time I was hovering between sanity and insanity.”[\[20\]](#)

Finally, however, from a Christian perspective it seems that yoga could also be spiritually harmful. To understand why, let’s return to the experience of “kundalini.” Yoga scholar Hans Rieker declares, “Kundalini [is] the mainstay of all yoga practices.”[\[21\]](#) But what exactly is kundalini and why is it so central to yoga practice?

Swami Vivekananda summarizes the kundalini experience as follows: “When awakened through the practice of spiritual disciplines, it rises through the spinal column, passes through the various centres, and at last reaches the brain, whereupon the yogi experiences samadhi, or total absorption in the Godhead.”[\[22\]](#) And researcher John White takes the importance of this experience even further declaring: “Although the word kundalini comes from the yogic tradition, nearly all the world’s major religions, spiritual paths, and

genuine occult traditions see something akin to the kundalini experience as having significance in “divinizing” a person. The word itself may not appear...but the concept is there...as a key to attaining godlike stature.”{23}

Reading such descriptions of the kundalini, or coiled serpent power, the Christian can almost hear the hiss of that “serpent of old...who deceives the whole world.”{24} In Eden, he flattered our first parents by telling them: “You will be like God.”{25} And though Christianity and yoga have very different conceptions of God, isn’t this essentially what yoga promises?

Swami Ajaya once said, “The main teaching of Yoga is that man’s true nature is divine.”{26} Obviously this is not the Christian view of man. But if the goal of yoga is to realize one’s essential divinity through union with “God,” then shouldn’t the Christian view the practice that leads to this realization as potentially spiritually harmful? Next, we’ll conclude our discussion by asking whether it’s really possible to separate yoga philosophy from yoga practice.

## **Can Philosophy and Practice be Separated?**

We’ve seen that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline whose central doctrines are utterly incompatible with those of Christianity. Even hatha yoga, often considered to be exclusively concerned with physical development, is best understood as merely a means of helping the yogi reach the goal of samadhi, or union with “God.” Furthermore, we’ve seen that all yoga, including hatha, has the potential to be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful.

In light of such evidence, it may appear that this question—“Can yoga philosophy be separated from yoga practice?”—has already been answered in the negative. And this is certainly the view of many yoga scholars. Dave Fetcho, formerly of the Ananda Marga Yoga Society, has written, “Physical yoga, according to its classical definitions, is



inheritably and functionally incapable of being separated from Eastern religious metaphysics.”{27} What’s more, yoga authorities Feuerstein and Miller, in discussing yoga postures (asana) and breathing exercises (pranayama), indicate that such practices are more than just another form of physical exercise; indeed, they “are *psychosomatic* exercises.”{28} Does this mean that separating theory from practice is simply impossible with yoga?

If one carefully looks through an introductory text on hatha yoga,{29} one will see many different postures illustrated. A number of these may be similar, if not identical, to exercises and stretches one is already doing. Indeed, if one is engaged in a regular stretching program, this is quite probable. This raises an important question: Suppose that such beginning level yoga postures are done in a context completely free of yogic philosophy. In such a case as this, doesn’t honesty compel us to acknowledge at least the *possibility* of separating theory from practice?

While I hate to disagree with scholars who know far more about the subject than I do, this distinction does seem valid to me. However, let me quickly add that I see this distinction as legitimate *only* at the very beginning of such practices, and *only* with regard to the postures. The breathing exercises, for various reasons, remain problematic.{30} But this distinction raises yet another question, for how many people begin an exercise program intending never to move beyond the most basic level? And since by the very nature of yoga practice, such a distinction could *only* be valid at the very earliest of stages, why would a Christian ever want to begin this process? It seems to me that if someone wants an exercise program with physical benefits similar to yoga, but without all the negative spiritual baggage, they should consider low-impact or water aerobics, water ballet, or simple stretching.{31} These programs can be just as beneficial for the body, without potentially endangering the soul. In my opinion, then,



Christians would be better off to never begin yoga practice.

[Note from the webmistress: Also see [Why a Christian Alternative to Yoga?](#) on the PraiseMoves.com website for an excellent treatment of this subject from a former yoga instructor who explains why the two are incompatible.]

## Notes

1. Raphael, *Essence and Purpose of Yoga: The Initiatory Pathways to the Transcendent* (Massachusetts: Element Books, Inc., 1996), back cover.
2. Brad Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class" in *The Watchman Expositor* (Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001): 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., cited in Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York: New American Library, 1957), 120ff.
6. *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), back cover.
7. Ibid., 71.
8. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 601.
9. See Romans 1:18-25.
10. See Genesis 1:26.
11. John 1:29.
12. See 2 Corinthians 5:19.
13. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," (Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, 1978), cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 602.
14. Ibid., 603.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 602.
17. See "Source and Context: Patanjali and Ashtanga Yoga" at <http://www.iyisf.org/>. This quotation was obtained from the site on March 1, 2002.

18. Ibid.
19. Swami Prabhavananda, *Yoga and Mysticism* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1972), 18, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 604.
20. Gopi Krishna, *The Awakening of Kundalini* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 124, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 608.
21. Hans Ulrich Rieker, *The Yoga of Light: Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), 101, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
22. Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1970), 16, cited in Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class," 5.
23. John White, ed., *Kundalini Evolution and Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 17, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
24. See Revelation 12:9.
25. See Genesis 3:5.
26. Swami Rama, *Lectures on Yoga: Practical Lessons on Yoga* (Glenview, IL: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga, Science and Philosophy, 1976, rev.), vi, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 596.
27. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," 2, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
28. George Feuerstein and Jeanine Miller, *Yoga and Beyond: Essays in Indian Philosophy* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 27-28, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
29. For example, Richard Hittleman, *Introduction to Yoga* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969)
30. For instance, the breathing exercises can be physically dangerous. Sri Chinmoy wrote, "To practice pranayama without real guidance is very dangerous. I know of three persons who have died from it..." See *Great Masters and the Cosmic Gods* (Jamaica, NY: Agni Press, 1977), 8, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 604. In addition,

however, from a Christian perspective such exercises may also be mentally and spiritually dangerous (at least potentially) because they can induce altered states of consciousness that may make one more vulnerable to demonic deception. Indeed, psychologist Ernest L. Rossi has written of pranayama: "The manual manipulation of the nasal cycle during meditation (dhyana) is the most thoroughly documented of techniques for altering consciousness." See Benjamin B. Wolman and Montague Ullman, eds., *Handbook of States of Consciousness* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986), 113, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 595.

31. Of course such programs will need to be tailored to each individual's needs and goals. It's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.

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# Astrology: Do the Heavens Declare the Destiny of Man?

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn critically examines the claim of astrology that the heavenly bodies somehow influence, or even determine, events on earth.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## A Brief Historical Introduction

Astrology is based on the notion that the heavenly bodies somehow influence, or even determine, events on earth. It is believed that an accurate understanding of these heavenly influences, especially at the time of one's birth, can give us insight into a person's character and destiny. Although belief

in astrology is very ancient, it continues to have many adherents even in our own day. One writer estimates that as many as one quarter of the world's population "believe in and follow astrology to some extent."[\[1\]](#) Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from such beliefs. Estimates indicate that anywhere from ten to thirty percent of those claiming to be "born again" Christians entertain some belief that astrology is true.[\[2\]](#)

Although there is some scholarly disagreement over when the western system of astrology originated, astrologer Robert Parry observes, "Conventional scholarship leans toward the view that astrology began in the old Mesopotamian civilizations of the Middle-East sometime around the second millennium B.C."[\[3\]](#) At this time there was no distinction between astrology and astronomy. However, "because centers of learning were also . . . centers of religion, natural astrology soon became corrupted by pagan myths, deities, and magic. As a result, two forms of astrology began to coexist: natural astrology ([or] astronomy) and religious astrology."[\[4\]](#) It was "the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy . . . [who] refined astrology to its present form in the second century A.D."[\[5\]](#) It is this brand of astrology that has most influenced the West. But it is by no means the only form in existence.

Ancient astrological systems differing from our western variety were developed both in China and India—as well as elsewhere. But not only do these systems differ from ours, they also differ from each other. Furthermore, within each of these three major systems, we also find many contradictory subsystems.[\[6\]](#) For example, "Not all western astrologers agree that there are 12 zodiacal signs. Steven Schmidt in his book *Astrology 14* claims . . . a total of 14 signs. But some argue for only 8, others for 10, and a few for 24."[\[7\]](#) It was doubtless these many differences that led astrologer Richard Nolle to admit that there are nearly as many astrological

systems as there are astrologers!{8}

But don't all these differences affect astrology's reliability? After all, won't different systems give different results? Indeed they will. For instance, one astrologer may predict that you'll have a wonderful marriage; another that you'll never marry—you might easily receive contradictory readings from different astrologers! And the law of non-contradiction says they can't both be right (though they could both be wrong). It is for reasons such as these that we should be hesitant about placing our faith in astrology.

## Difficulties in Chart Interpretation

"The basis of all astrological work is the Birth Chart. This is an accurate map of the sky for the exact date, time and place of birth. . . . [T]his can be the birth of a person . . . a nation . . . or even of an idea or question."{9} Once the astrologer has such information, he is ready to begin interpreting the chart. But what sort of information is most relevant to chart interpretation?

Although we cannot cover all the details, the astrologer is primarily concerned with examining the planets, houses, and signs—and how these are related to one another. Thus, astrologer Robert Parry writes, "[E]ach planet has a distinct and definite character which is modified by the sign and house in which it is placed. Mars, for example, is the planet of aggression, extraversion, self-confidence and sexuality."{10} The "signs" are the twelve signs of the zodiac. "Everyone is . . . born under one of these . . . signs (Pisces the fish, and so on)."{11} Finally, "the *houses* are the 12 divisions of the zodiac that are said to correspond symbolically to every area of life . . . the planets are said to travel through the houses, influencing each area of life as they do."{12}

But the astrologer must not only pay attention to the planets, houses and signs, he must also note their relationships to one

another. For instance, “Angular relationships between planets are . . . very important. These relationships are called ‘aspects’ . . . a Square (90-degree) aspect between two planets indicates tension or disagreement . . . whereas a Trine (120-degree) aspect indicates sympathy and cooperation.”[{13}](#)

Interpreting a birth chart is thus a very complex affair. Indeed, one astrologer “calculated the *least* possible number of different combinations resulting from the most basic . . . chart . . . [as] roughly equivalent to the estimated number of atoms in the known universe!”[{14}](#) And such complexity is just one of many difficulties.

Another is that not all astrologers agree on the number of signs that need to be considered in interpreting a chart. While most acknowledge twelve, some think there are *less* and others *more* than this. There are also differences regarding where the various houses should be placed on a chart. And clearly such differences will lead to conflicting interpretations.

Finally, there is the problem of *authority*.[{15}](#) What factual basis do astrologers have for asserting that the Square aspect indicates disagreement, while a Trine indicates cooperation? Why do some astrologers consider Saturn a “bad” planet and Jupiter a “good” planet? How does the astrologer know “that the first house represents personality, the second . . . money [and] . . . the eighth . . . death?”[{16}](#) Since such assertions appear to be arbitrary, it follows that results will be arbitrary as well. One should, therefore, be wary about accepting the advice of astrologers—at least when they’re speaking *as astrologers*!

## The Problem of Twins

In his book, *In Defense of Astrology*, Robert Parry attempts to

defend astrology against the twelve most common objections that are usually raised against it. Let's consider just one of these: the problem of twins.

Some twins are born within minutes of each other, yet they may lead very different lives. But if one's character and destiny are largely determined by the positions of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth, we would expect twins to be remarkably similar in these respects. Clearly, however, this is not always the case. Even Parry admits that one twin may die quite young while "the other lives on to a ripe old age."[\[17\]](#) As an astrologer, how does he deal with this difficulty?

He begins by observing, "Even a few minutes can make a lot of difference to a birth chart."[\[18\]](#) He then argues that even when one twin dies while the other lives, "the same event, namely death, has entered both lives at the same time. One twin dies . . . the other is touched radically by the sorrow . . . of . . . death."[\[19\]](#) He concludes, "Surely this is an argument for, rather than against astrology."[\[20\]](#) But how convincing is this argument, really?

While it may be true that a few minutes can occasionally make a big difference to a birth chart, this is clearly not always the case. Indeed, some scholars state that even "a birth interval of several minutes would make no real difference."[\[21\]](#) Second, there is surely a very big difference indeed between someone actually dying on the one hand, and someone losing a loved one to death on the other. It seems undeniable that the destinies of two such people are radically different. Surely this constitutes a legitimate objection to the ability of astrology to predict a person's destiny.

Additionally, for those of us who accept the authority of the Bible, it's instructive to contemplate the lives of Jacob and Esau, twins born so close to one another in time that Jacob came out of the womb "with his hand holding on to Esau's heel."[\[22\]](#) Astrology would expect these two men to have very



similar personalities and destinies. But did they?

The Bible records, "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a peaceful man living in tents."[\[23\]](#) In addition to being quite different in personality and temperament, they were different physically as well. Esau was a hairy man, but Jacob a smooth man.[\[24\]](#) But most importantly, the destinies of both men, as well as their descendents, were drastically different. God bestowed His special favor on Jacob, but rejected Esau declaring, "I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau."[\[25\]](#) Surely if astrology were true, one would not expect twins born at virtually the same time to be so thoroughly different in both their character and destiny.

## Astrology and Science

Numerous studies have attempted to test the claims of astrology. The scientist most often cited by astrologers as having furnished "proof" for some of its ideas is the late French psychologist Michel Gauquelin. Astrologer Robert Parry writes:

Gauquelin's results are remarkable. For instance, the traditionally energetic and aggressive planet Mars is shown quite conclusively to be more frequently strong in the charts of sportsmen than chance would normally allow. . . . These professional attributes tend, moreover, to be in line with traditional astrological law, which has always associated Mars with competitive spirit.[\[26\]](#)

Gauquelin's results are known as the "Mars effect." He claimed to have found evidence for this effect in "a study that attempted to test whether or not the birth dates of 2088 sports champions were 'statistically significant' according to the position of Mars."[\[27\]](#) Ironically, although some slight evidence for this effect was indeed noted, Gauquelin "did not consider it an astrological effect."[\[28\]](#) Moreover, although

frequently cited as lending validity to the subject, he “never claimed to validate traditional astrology in any sense.”[\[29\]](#)

Still, he did claim to find some evidence for the “Mars effect.” Doesn’t this lend some credibility to astrology? Not necessarily. “The problem for astrologers is that the ‘Mars effect’ has never been confirmed in 30 years of subsequent studies.”[\[30\]](#) One of the most damaging studies in this regard was published in 1995 by a team of French scientists. After an exhaustive twelve-year study, the team’s “attempt to independently replicate Gauquelin’s findings failed; it offered ‘no evidence for the Mars effect.’”[\[31\]](#) Since this “effect” is generally considered strong confirmation for the truth of astrology, it seems that scientific support for the subject is quite hard to come by.

But aren’t there other tests for the validity of astrology? For instance, don’t all the predictions made by astrologers offer a means of testing the subject’s accuracy? Indeed they do, but the results are usually quite unconvincing. While successful predictions may sometimes occur, as a general rule, “published predictions . . . seem to have a worse record than client self-disclosures.”[\[32\]](#)

In a study conducted between 1974-79, over 3,000 predictions by such alleged astrologers as Jeane Dixon and Carroll Righter were examined. The number of failures was 2673—almost 90 percent! Moreover, “the astrologers . . . were given the benefit of the doubt for any prediction that could have been attributed to shrewd guessing, vague wording, or inside information.”[\[33\]](#) Without such benefits, the failure rate would have been almost 100 percent! The authors of the study concluded, “The results . . . paint a dismal picture . . . for the . . . claim that ‘astrology works’.”[\[34\]](#)

## **Astrology and the Bible**

What does the Bible say about astrology? According to one

astrologer, "The Bible is full of the philosophy of astrology."[{35}](#) But when one carefully examines the passages thought to speak favorably of astrology, one is bound to conclude with Drs. Bjornstad and Johnson: "Absolutely NO scriptural passage supports astrology . . . not a single reference even indicates tolerance of this art."[{36}](#)

The Bible condemns faith in astrology as futile and misplaced. In Jeremiah 10, God issues this warning: "Do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens although the nations are terrified by them; for the customs of the peoples are vanity."[{37}](#) God is both the Creator and sovereign Ruler of the heavens; people are therefore to trust and fear Him—not what He has made.

Unlike God, astrology is powerless to deliver those who trust in it. In Isaiah 47, "God condemns Babylon and tells of its impending judgment."[{38}](#) In verse 13 He says, "Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you." But that their efforts would be in vain is clearly seen in the concluding words of the chapter, "There is none to save you."[{39}](#) Whatever predictive power astrology has, it is utterly eclipsed by the power of the sovereign Lord who created and rules all things!

Finally, in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, astrology comes under the same condemnation as all other forms of divination. There are likely many reasons for this, but let me mention just one. If the ideas of astrology are largely discredited, what accounts for its sometimes-remarkable predictive power? The Bible, as well as the frank admissions of some astrologers, indicates supernatural, or spiritual, involvement. But if God condemns astrology, what sort of spirits are we talking about? Though it may be unpopular to say so, the Bible suggests they are demons.[{40}](#) And it's eerie how many astrologers actually attribute their predictive powers to the wisdom of their spirit guides. One professional astrologer of twelve years

confessed: "I never met a really successful astrologer . . . who did not admit . . . that spiritism was the power behind the craft."[\[41\]](#) Could it be that astrology works (when it works) not because of its discredited and contradictory ideas, but because of the unseen power of the spirit world? If so, God's condemnation of astrology may be partially motivated by a concern to protect people from the influence of such evil spirits.

In conclusion, the heavens do not declare the destiny of man, but the glory of the God who made them.[\[42\]](#) It is God, not the heavens, "who works all things after the counsel of His will."[\[43\]](#)

## Notes

1. Lawrence E. Jerome, *Astrology Disproved* (Prometheus Books: Buffalo, NY, 1977), 1, cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Harvest House Publishers: Eugene, Oregon, 1996), 54.
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4. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Victor Books: Wheaton, Illinois, 1990), 152.
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14. Ankerberg and Weldon, 57.

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21. Boa, 160.

22. Genesis 25:26.

23. Genesis 25:27.

24. Genesis 27:11.

25. Malachi 1:2-3; see also Romans 9:10-13.

26. Parry, 188.

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40. See in particular Acts 16:16-18.

41. Personal correspondence from Karen Winterburn to John Ankerberg and John Weldon, cited in *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 71.

42. See Psalms 19:1 and 8:3, as well as Genesis 1:16.

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# The Mystery of Reincarnation – A Christian Perspective

*Can reincarnation be true? Dr. Pat Zukeran examines evidence for this Eastern belief and compares it to the Biblical concept of resurrection.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## Eastern Doctrine of Reincarnation

Many cultures throughout the world have long held to the concept of reincarnation. A recent Gallup Poll revealed that

one in four Americans believed in reincarnation. Reincarnation literally means, "to come again in the flesh." World religions author Geoffrey Parrinder defines reincarnation as "the belief that the soul or some power passes after death into another body."[\[1\]](#)

Reincarnation is a major facet of the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Many sects have variant views of reincarnation. Here is a general summary of the basic principles. Most hold to a pantheistic view of God. Pantheism comes from the Greek *pan* meaning "all" and concept of *theism* meaning "God." In Pantheism, God is an impersonal force made up of all things; the universe is God and God is the universe. All created beings are an extension of or an emanation from God.

Living things possess a physical body and an immaterial entity called the soul, life force, or Jiva. At death, the life force separates from the body and takes a new physical form. The law of karma determines what form the individual will take. This law teaches that one's thoughts, words, and deeds have an ethical consequence, fixing one's lot in future existences.[\[2\]](#) Our present state is the result of actions and intentions performed in a previous life. The amount of good or bad karma attained in our present life will determine if one returns in a higher or a lower form of existence.

One will endure hundreds, even millions of reincarnations, either evolving into a higher or lower form of life to work off the debt of karma. This cycle of reincarnation is called the *law of samsara*. Eventually one hopes to work off all bad karma and free oneself from the reincarnation cycle and attain unity with the divine. This freeing from the cycle of reincarnation is called *moksha*. The soul is viewed as imprisoned in a body and must be freed to attain unity with the divine.

Each school of thought varies in their teaching regarding how



one attains ultimate deliverance from the reincarnation cycle. Most agree that it is only from the human form one can attain unity with the divine. Deliverance from the bondage of the body can be attained through various means. Some schools teach that through enlightenment that comes from knowledge, meditation, and channeling, one can break the cycle. Other schools teach that deliverance comes through faith and service to a particular deity or manifestation of the divine. In return, the deity will aid you in your quest for moksha. Other schools teach that one can attain deliverance through discipline and good works.

Much of the reincarnation teaching in the West is adapted from the teachings in the eastern religions. Is there evidence that proves reincarnation to be true? We will examine these next.

## **Evidences for Reincarnation**

Leading reincarnation researcher Dr. Ian Stephenson, head of the department of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, believes there is compelling evidence for reincarnation. Proponents give five proofs: hypnotic regression, déjà vu, Xenoglossy, birthmarks, and the Bible.

The first proof is hypnotic regression. Reincarnation proponents cite examples of individuals giving vivid and accurate descriptions of people, places, and events the individual could not have previously known. Today there is a small branch of psychology that practice past life therapy, the belief that one's present problems are the result of problems from a previous life.

However, the accuracy of facts attained from hypnosis remains highly questionable. First, some people are known to have lied under hypnosis. Second, human memory is subject to distortions of all sorts. Third, under hypnosis a patient's awareness of fantasy and reality is blurred. Dr. Kenneth Bowers, a psychologist at the University of Waterloo and Dr. Jan Dywane

at McMaster University states:

“. . .although hypnosis increases recall, it also increases errors. In their study, hypnotized subjects correctly recalled twice as many items as did un hypnotized members of a control group but also made three times as many mistakes. During hypnosis, you are creating memories.”[\[3\]](#)

Fourth, studies have shown that under hypnosis, patients are easily influenced by leading questions. In the process of hypnosis, the patient is asked to release control of his or her consciousness and body. Hans Holzer states, “Generally women are easier to hypnotize than men. But there are exceptions even among women, who may have difficulty letting go control over their bodies and personalities, something essential if genuine hypnosis is to take place.”[\[4\]](#) In this state, memories can be altered by the cues from the hypnotist. For these reasons, many law courts do not consider testimony under hypnosis reliable evidence.

Past life recall can also be attributed to the influence of culture. Cultures heavily steeped in the doctrine of reincarnation create an environment conducive to past life recall. The countries of India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and western Asia have a very high number of cases. Many who make claims of past life recall win the respect of their society. In areas like these the culture can have a strong influence on one’s subconscious mind. If reincarnation is true, past life recall should be prevalent in all cultures, not primarily in one area.

Finally, the majority of the incidents occur among children. Dr. Stephenson states, “Many of those claiming to have lived before are children. Often they are very emotional when they talk of the person they used to be, and they give minute details of the life they lived.”[\[5\]](#) Children are the most susceptible to suggestion and their testimony should be viewed with caution.

At best, the evidence from hypnotic regress can only suggest a possibility of reincarnation, but it does not conclusively prove it.

Déjà vu refers to a distinct feeling you have been to a place or performed an event before, while engaged in something that is presently happening. Reincarnation proponents attribute this to a previous life. However, researchers give alternate explanations. In our subconscious, we often relate a present event with a past one that the conscious mind does not remember. Since the two events are similar we often fuse the events together in our minds, thus creating an impression that we have experienced this before. Other researchers have shown that the data that enters the eye is sometimes delayed for a microsecond on its way to the brain. This leads one to think that they have seen the data before.

Xenoglossy is the sudden ability to speak a language one has never learned. Reincarnation advocates attribute this as the language one spoke in a previous life. However, cryptoamnesia can account for this phenomenon. In cryptoamnesia, an individual forgets information that was learned earlier and recalls it at a later time, not knowing its source. It is possible that one can hear foreign terms through the media or as a child and recall these when prompted.

The fourth proof is the appearance of unique birthmarks that are similar to those possessed by a deceased individual. However, it is difficult to show any connection to reincarnation. Similarity does not prove sameness.

These alternative explanations can explain most of the evidences for reincarnation. However where they fall short, we must entertain the possibility of demonic possession where a foreign spirit takes control of the person as demonstrated several times throughout the New Testament. Demonic spirits have existed for thousands of years and are not limited by time and space. The information they possess can be injected

into a person's mind during possession. Eastern meditation techniques allow for this possibility. Dr. Bro writes of Edgar Cayce, the father of the New Age movement, "Cayce's power came without equipment, in quiet. He appeared to empty himself, to hollow out his consciousness as a receptacle, a conduit." [\[6\]](#)

Even reincarnation advocates believe that many cases of past life recall can be attributed to possession. They confess that it is difficult to determine whether a past life recall is the result of reincarnation or possession. William de Arteaga states, "In reference to the demonic counterfeit hypothesis, we can safely say that for many past life visions it is the most solidly verified hypothesis of all." [\[7\]](#)

Edgar Cayce stated, "That's what I always thought, and against this I put the idea that the Devil might be tempting me to do his work by operating through me when I was conceited enough to think God had given me special power. . . ." [\[8\]](#)

Although the evidence can be interpreted to support reincarnation, it cannot conclusively prove it.

## **Biblical Evidence for Reincarnation**

Although reincarnation proponents cite the Bible as proof of their claim, the Bible refutes the idea. It teaches that we live once, die once, and then enter our eternal state. Hebrews 9:26b-27 states, "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. . . ." The focus here is on the sacrificial work of Christ. Instead of the continual animal sacrifices needed to atone for sins under the old covenant, under the new covenant Christ paid for sins once and for all.

In the same way as Christ, who appeared only once, man is destined to die once. Just as there is finality in Christ's

sacrifice, there is finality in man's physical death. After that, the soul faces the judgment before God to determine one's eternal destiny. Once judgment is delivered, Scripture gives no evidence that sins can be atoned for in another time of living on earth (Rev. 20:11-15; Luke 16:19-31; Matt. 25:31-46).

The passage often appealed to by those who support reincarnation is John 9:1-3, which states, "As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" Reincarnation proponents claim that in this passage the disciples are attributing the man's blindness as the result of bad karma from a previous existence.

However, Jewish theology attributed birth defects to two factors. Prenatal sin committed by the baby after conception, but before birth, or sin committed by the parents. Genesis 25:22, the struggle of Jacob and Esau in Rachel's womb, was interpreted as a conflict that resulted from prenatal sin. Exodus 20:5 states that the parents' sin often had repercussions on their offspring. However, in the passage in John 9:1-3, Jesus refutes any connection between the man's defects and any previous sins, thus putting an end to any concept of karma.

Another passage is Matthew 11 where Jesus states that John the Baptist is Elijah. Reincarnation proponents interpret John as being the reincarnated Elijah from the Old Testament. This cannot be true for the following reasons. First, in 2 Kings 2, Elijah never died, but was taken to heaven. In the reincarnation model one must die before one can take on a new form. Second, in Matthew 17 Elijah appears with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. John the Baptist had lived and died by this time. If he had been the reincarnation of Elijah, John would have appeared instead. John came not as the reincarnation of Elijah, but in a metaphorical sense as Elijah in that he was filled with the same spirit and power as

Elijah. So the Bible does not affirm reincarnation.

## **Reincarnation and Resurrection**

The Bible teaches that what happens after death is a resurrection, not reincarnation. First Corinthians 15 is one of the clearest passages on what happens to the human soul after death. Like the reincarnation proponents, we agree that the immaterial component of man separates from the body at death and survives eternally. We both agree that the soul inhabits another bodily form.

The major difference is this: reincarnation proponents believe that the soul inhabits many bodily forms in an evolutionary progress toward union with the divine. This can happen over millions of years or in a shorter period. The Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:26b-27, as previously discussed, that we live once, die once and then enter into an eternal state.

Our eternal state is described in 1 Corinthians 15. Verse 20 states, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." By "firstfruits" Paul was drawing on the imagery found in the Old Testament. The firstfruits were prior to the main harvest and served as an example and an assurance of the harvest that was coming. So Christ's resurrection is a precursor and a guarantee of the believer's resurrection. His resurrection greatly differs from the reincarnation model.

First, Christ's resurrected body physically resembled His earthly body. It had physical properties displayed by the fact that He could be touched, He communicated, and He ate. His glorified body also possessed supernatural attributes. He was able to walk through walls, appear and disappear, and ascend to heaven.

Paul describes the glorified body as having a different kind of flesh from the earthly body. He states, "All flesh is not

the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another, fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. . . ." The new body will be imperishable and immortal. It will be a spiritual body that is designed for life in heaven. The glorified body will not suffer the effects of sin or the effects of time, sickness, or pain.

The unrighteous, however, enter a state of eternal torment immediately after death. Luke 16:19-31 demonstrates this point. In this example the unrighteous wealthy man enters hell immediately at death. In Matthew 25 the goats enter a state of eternal punishment with no hope of escape.

In summary, these are the differences. First, reincarnation teaches that the migration of the soul occurs over many lifetimes while resurrection occurs once. Second, reincarnation teaches we inhabit many different bodies while resurrection teaches we inhabit only one body on earth and a glorified immortal body in heaven that resembles our earthly one. Third, reincarnation teaches we are in an evolutionary progress to union with God while resurrection teaches we arrive at our ultimate state immediately at death. The Bible does not support reincarnation and it must not be confused with the doctrine of the resurrection, which is very different.

## Notes

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3. Elizabeth Stark, "Hypnosis on Trial," *Psychology Today*, February 1984, p. 35, as cited by Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 67.
4. Hans Holzer, *Life Beyond*, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1994, 176.
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6. Harmon Bro, *A Seer Out of Season: the Life of Edgar Cayce*, (New York: New American Library, 1989), 13.

7. William de Arteaga, *Past Life Visions: A Christian Exploration* (New York: Seabury, 1983), p. 174, as cited by Geisler and Amano in *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 80.

8. Thomas Sague, *The Story of Edgar Cayce: There is a River*, (Virginia Beach: Association for Research and Enlightenment, 1973), 219, as cited by Geisler and Amano in *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 79.

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# Taoism and Christianity

*The Chinese translation of John 1:1 reads, 'In the beginning was the Tao...' Are Taoism and Christianity compatible? Dr. Michael Gleghorn says that even though there are some similarities, Christianity's uniqueness remains separate from all philosophies, including Taoism.*

## Historical Background

The philosophy of Taoism is traditionally held to have originated in China with a man named Lao Tzu. Although some scholars doubt whether he was an actual historical figure, tradition dates his life from 604-517 B.C. The story goes that Lao Tzu, "saddened by his people's disinclination to cultivate the natural goodness he advocated",[\[1\]](#) decided to head west and abandon civilization. As he was leaving, the gatekeeper asked if he would write down his teachings for the benefit of society. Lao Tzu consented, retired for a few days, and returned with a brief work called *Tao Te Ching*, "The Classic

of the Way and its Power.”{2} It “contains 81 short chapters describing the meaning of Tao and how one should live according to the Tao.”{3}

The term *Tao* is typically translated into English as “way”, but it can also be translated as “path,” “road,” or “course.” Interestingly, however, one scholar cites James Legge as stating that the term might even be understood “in a triple sense as at once ‘being’, ‘reason’, and ‘speech’.”{4}

After Lao Tzu, probably the most important Taoist philosopher has been Chuang Tzu, who is generally believed to have lived sometime between 399-295 B.C.{5} Like the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Chuang Tzu viewed all of reality as “dynamic and ever-changing.”{6} Also like Heraclitus, he embraced a sort of moral relativism, believing that there is no ultimate difference between what men call good and evil for all opposites are reconciled in the Tao.{7}

Throughout history, Taoist ideas have been expressed in various ways. Huston Smith, in *The World’s Religions*, divides Taoist thought into three different, yet related, camps—the philosophical, “vitalizing”, and religious Taoisms.{8}

Historically, the two most prominent representatives of philosophical Taoism have been Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The chief object of philosophical Taoism “is to live in a way that conserves life’s vitality by not expending it in useless, draining ways, the chief of which are friction and conflict.”{9} One does this by living in harmony with the Tao, or Way, of all things: the Way of nature, of society, and of oneself. Taoist philosophers have a particular concept characterizing action that is in harmony with the Tao. They call it *wu-wei*. Literally this means “non-action”, but practically speaking it means taking no action which is contrary to nature. Thus, “action in the mode of *wu-wei* is action in which friction—in interpersonal relationships, in intra-psychic conflict, and in relation to nature—is reduced

to the minimum.”{10}

“Vitalizing” Taoists have a different approach to life. Rather than attempting to *conserve* vitality by taking no action contrary to nature, “vitalizing” Taoists desire to *increase* their available quota of vital energy, which they refer to as *ch’i*. “Vitalizing” Taoists have sought to maximize *ch’i*, or vital energy, through—among other things— nutrition, breathing exercises, and meditation.{11} The last variety, religious Taoism, did not take shape until the second century A.D.{12} Religious Taoists attempt to use magical rites to harness occult powers for humane ends in the physical world.{13} Sadly, this form of Taoism is filled with many harmful superstitions.

## The Taoism of Lao Tzu

Having briefly described the three dominant forms of Taoism, let us now turn our attention back to the thought of Lao Tzu in *Tao Te Ching*.

In the first place, what did Lao Tzu teach about Tao? Interestingly, (and somewhat ironically), *Tao Te Ching* begins by asserting that words are not adequate for explaining Tao: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.”{14}

Of course, just because words cannot adequately explain Tao does not mean that we can gain no conception of Tao whatsoever. Indeed, if that were so the first sentence should have also been the last. But it was not. Thus, chapter 25 reads in part:

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,  
Which existed before heaven and earth.  
Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not  
change.  
It operates everywhere and is free from danger.  
It may be considered the mother of the universe.

I do not know its name; I call it Tao.{15}

From this passage we learn a great deal about Tao: it existed prior to the physical world;{16} it is independent and immutable (i.e. does not change); its action is omnipresent; and finally, “it may be considered the mother of the universe.” It is quite interesting that Tao, as described above, appears to share many attributes with the Christian conception of God. However, it is important to keep in mind that some of these similarities are more apparent than real—and there are also major differences. We will mention some of these later.

Another way to describe the indescribable is to say what Tao most closely resembles. The closest analogue to Tao in the physical world is water. Thus we read in chapter 8:

The best (man) is like water.

Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.

It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.

This is why it is so near to Tao.{17}

According to Lao Tzu, man should model himself after Tao. Since water so closely resembles the workings of Tao, the Taoist sage could draw certain lessons for human behavior by carefully observing the behavior of water. Thus, the sage might observe the beneficial qualities of water, and that these qualities are combined with water’s natural tendency to seek the lowest places. It may have been just such observations that led Lao Tzu to conclude his classic thus:

The Way of Heaven is to benefit others and not to injure.

The Way of the sage is to act but not to compete.{18}

Such principles have application not only for the individual, but also for society. A proper application of Tao to the art of government requires the principle of *wu-wei* (i.e. taking no action contrary to nature). Taoism seeks a harmonious

relationship with nature rather than one of domination or interference. Likewise, Lao Tzu believed the best government to be the one which interfered least with the governed (i.e. a laissez-faire approach).{19} So long as men live in harmony with Tao, both their private and public lives will be free from conflict. But when Tao is abandoned, conflict is inevitable—and with it misery, oppression, and war.{20}

## The Taoism of Chuang Tzu

In some respects the Taoism of Chuang Tzu represents a significant departure from that of Lao Tzu. Still, there are also important similarities that should not be overlooked. One of these concerns the relationship of Tao to the physical universe. In words reminiscent of *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu* declares:

Before heaven and earth came into being, Tao existed by itself from all time. . . . It created heaven and earth. . . . It is prior to heaven and earth. . . . {21}

The most interesting part of this statement is the assertion that Tao “created heaven and earth.” How are we to understand this? Does Chuang Tzu view Tao as Creator in the same sense in which Christians apply this term to God? Probably not. In addressing such questions one commentator has written: “Any personal God . . . is clearly out of harmony with Chuang Tzu’s philosophy.”{22} Properly speaking, Taoists view Tao more as a *principle* than a *person*.

This distinction is more clearly seen when one considers Chuang Tzu’s moral philosophy. Chuang Tzu embraced a doctrine of moral relativism; that is, he did not believe that there was really any ultimate distinction between what men call “right” and “wrong”, or “good” and “evil.” He writes:

In their own way things are all right . . . generosity, strangeness, deceit, and abnormality. The Tao identifies

them all as one.{23}

This statement helps clarify why the notion of a personal God is inconsistent with Chuang Tzu's philosophy. Persons make distinctions, have preferences, and choose one thing over another. However, according to Chuang Tzu, Tao makes no distinction between right and wrong, but identifies them as one.

This has serious implications for followers of Tao. Unless educated to suppress such notions, most people inherently recognize the validity of moral distinctions. Indeed, the *Chuang Tzu* confirms this, but belittles those who embrace such distinctions by saying that they "misunderstand . . . the reality of things" and "must be either stupid or wrong." {24} Once the goal of the Taoist sage is to live all of life in harmony with Tao, it seems that Chuang Tzu would have his followers abandon genuine moral distinctions. This appears to be his intention when he writes, "...the sage harmonizes the right and wrong and rests in natural equalization. This is called following two courses at the same time." {25} In my opinion, this represents somewhat of a departure from the doctrines of Lao Tzu. True, slight strains of moral relativism can be found in *Tao Te Ching*, but Chuang Tzu elevates this doctrine to a place of central importance in his own philosophy.

Finally, something must be said of Chuang Tzu's belief that all reality is characterized by incessant change and transformation. Although Heraclitus had already taught a similar doctrine to the Greeks, one scholar points out the originality of this concept in China by calling it "a new note in Chinese philosophy." {26} According to Chuang Tzu:

Things are born and die . . . they are now empty and now full, and their physical form is not fixed . . . Time cannot be arrested. The succession of decline, growth, fullness, and emptiness go in a cycle, each end becoming a new

beginning. This is the way to talk about the . . . principle of all things.{27}

With Chuang Tzu the doctrine of change assumed something of a permanent significance in Taoist thought.

## **Heraclitus, Chuang Tzu, and the Apostle John**

Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher who thrived around 500 B.C. Although there are differences, the similarities between his philosophy and that of Chuang Tzu are quite impressive. Both held the doctrine of monism, believing that all reality is essentially one, or of the same essence. Both emphasized that this reality is in a state of constant change and transformation. And both embraced a doctrine of moral relativism, the idea that there are no objective moral standards that are universally true for all people at all times. In light of these similarities, it is no wonder that Fritjof Capra referred to Heraclitus as the “Greek ‘Taoist.’”{28}

But here a distinction emerges which is very important to the rest of this discussion. Heraclitus wrote in Greek; Chuang Tzu wrote in Chinese. Thus, Heraclitus never explicitly referred to *Tao*, for this is a Chinese term. He did, however, begin using a particular Greek word in a new, technical sense, to communicate concepts *similar* (though *not* identical) to that of *Tao*. The Greek word Heraclitus chose was *logos*.{29} Depending on its context, the word *logos* can have a variety of meanings; however, it is most commonly used in the sense of “word,” “message,” “speech,” and “reason.” It is the word John used of the pre-incarnate Christ in the prologue of his Gospel when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). In this verse it is the Greek term *logos* which is translated as “Word.” Now think back to the beginning of this discussion. It was mentioned that



while *Tao* is generally translated “way” or “path,” at least one scholar has said the term might also be understood “in a triple sense as at once ‘being’, ‘reason’, and ‘speech.’”[\[30\]](#) This makes a conceptual comparison with the term *logos* possible.

But only a comparison. The terms do not mean exactly the same thing and would not be interchangeable in every context. Still, some translators have seen enough similarity to justify using one term in place of another in at least some contexts. Remember John’s prologue? The Chinese translation reads, “In the beginning was the *Tao*, and the *Tao* was with God, and the *Tao* was God.” What are we to make of this?

Probably the first issue we must consider is whether the Apostle John was influenced by pagan thought in his use of the term *logos*. Although there have been many scholars in the past who thought he was, the drift of contemporary scholarship has been away from such notions.[\[31\]](#) In fact, more recent scholarship contends that we need only look to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, for the source of John’s *logos* doctrine. In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase “The word of the Lord” is often used. And, often enough, the Hebrew term for *word* was translated into Greek as *logos*. Since John intends to communicate that Jesus is *the* Word of God *incarnate*, we need look no further than the Septuagint for the source of this doctrine. Thus, John was most likely influenced by the Jewish scriptures rather than pagan philosophy in his doctrine of the *logos*.

## **Taoism and Christianity**

Given that the Apostle John, in his doctrine of the *logos*, was likely influenced by the Septuagint, what would those Gentile readers, not familiar with the Septuagint, but quite familiar with Greek philosophy make of John’s Gospel? A similar difficulty arises with the Chinese translation: might not the use of the term *Tao* affect their understanding of Christ?

Of course it might. Indeed, it seems that John's use of the term *logos* did influence some people to read ideas from Greek philosophy into their conception of Christ. Likewise, some Chinese readers might interpret Christ in a more Taoist manner due to the use of the term *Tao* in John's Gospel. We all approach every text with a certain *pre-understanding* that naturally influences our interpretation. Still, there would seem to be certain limits on how far this can *reasonably* influence our interpretation of Christ in John's Gospel. Consider a statement by D. H. Johnson:

. . . verbal similarities do not necessarily imply conceptual similarities. The use of similar words in seemingly similar ways can deceive us into thinking that two authors are discussing the same concept. Only when one document is understood in its own right can it be compared to another which must also be understood in its own right." [{32}](#)

We might say that every text will, to some extent, *impose* a particular meaning on the terms it uses. In the Chinese translation of John's Gospel it soon becomes apparent that the term *Tao*, while retaining some of its original meaning, has been endowed with a remarkable new significance! How so?

First, although the *Chuang Tzu* credits Tao with creation, we should not understand Tao as a *personal Creator*. In contrast, as D. H. Johnson writes, "The meaning of *logos* in the Johannine prologue is clear. The Word is the person of the Godhead through whom the world was created." [{33}](#) *Personality* is thus a crucial difference between the *Tao* of Taoism and the *Tao* of Christianity. Second, John 1:14 declares that "the Tao became flesh." The incarnation of Tao, like the incarnation of the *logos*, is a significant development in the meaning of this term. A Taoist would instantly recognize that Tao has assumed new meaning in John's Gospel, making it difficult to read too much Taoism into his understanding of Christ.

Thus, even though the term *Tao* is used of Christ in the Chinese translation of John's Gospel, we should not infer that Taoism and Christianity are really about the same thing. They are not. Christianity proclaims a *personal* Creator who is morally outraged by man's sinfulness and will one day judge the world in righteousness (Rom. 1:18-2:6). Taoism proclaims an *impersonal* creative principle which makes no moral distinction between right and wrong and which judges no one. Christianity proclaims that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25), and that eternal life is freely given to all who trust Him as Savior (John 1:12; Rom. 6:23). In contrast, the doctrine of moral relativism in Taoism clouds the need for a Savior from sin. Finally, and most shocking of all, is Jesus' claim to be the only true Tao—or Way—to the Father (John 14:6). If He is right, then Taoism, for all its admirable qualities, cannot have told *the eternal Tao*.

## Notes

1. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 197.
2. Ibid.
3. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 57.
4. James K. Feibleman, *Understanding Oriental Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1977), 108.
5. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 177.
6. Ibid., 178.
7. Ibid., 184.
8. Huston Smith, 199-218.
9. Ibid., 200.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 201.
12. Ibid., 205.
13. Ibid., 206.
14. *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New

York: Vintage Books, 1997), chap. 1.

15. *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 152.

16. However, in chap. 7 of Chan's translation we read, "Heaven is eternal and earth everlasting." There are some apparent inconsistencies in *Tao Te Ching*.

17. *Ibid.*, 143.

18. *Ibid.*, 176.

19. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 48.

20. *Ibid.*, chaps. 30 and 31.

21. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 194.

22. *Ibid.*, 181.

23. *Ibid.*, 184.

24. *Ibid.*, 206.

25. *Ibid.*, 184.

26. *Ibid.*, 178.