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. 1:182:6). 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.