

Philosophical Taoism: A Christian Appraisal

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.



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Taoism and the Tao

The philosophy of Taoism is traditionally held to have originated in China with a man named Lao-tzu. Although most scholars doubt that 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."

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."^{4} 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 that characterizes action in harmony with the Tao. They call it *wu-*

wei. Literally this means “non-action,” but practically speaking it means taking no action that 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.”[{5}](#)

But if we are to live in harmony with the Tao, we must first get some idea of what it is. And this presents something of a difficulty, for *Tao-Te Ching* begins by asserting that words are not adequate for explaining the Tao: “The Tao . . . that can be told of is not the eternal Tao.”[{6}](#) But if words cannot fully explain the Tao, they can at least suggest it. In chapter 25 we read:

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.[{7}](#)

This passage says a lot about the Tao. For instance, it is prior to the physical universe.[{8}](#) It is independent and does not change. It operates everywhere. And it apparently gave birth to the universe. If this is so, you may be thinking that the Tao sounds awfully similar to the Christian God. However, some of these similarities are more apparent than real – and there are also major differences.

God and the Tao

In philosophical Taoism, “Tao” is the term used to signify ultimate reality. “Tao is that reality . . . that existed prior to and gave rise to all other things, including Heaven and Earth and everything upon or within them.”[{9}](#) For this reason one might initially think that what a Taoist means by the Tao is virtually synonymous with what the Christian means

by God. But is this really so?

After Lao-tzu, the most important representative of philosophical Taoism was a man named Chuang-tzu, believed to have lived sometime between 399-295 B.C. He is the author of a text called the *Chuang Tzu*. While the thought of these two men is certainly different, there are also important similarities. One of these concerns the relationship of the 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." [{10}](#)

The most interesting part of this statement is the assertion that the Tao created heaven and earth. How are we to understand this? Does Chuang-tzu view the Tao as Creator in the same sense in which Christians would 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." [{11}](#) Properly speaking, Taoists view the Tao more as a *principle* than a *person*. Indeed, some scholars speak of the Tao as "an impersonal force of existence that is beyond differentiation." [{12}](#) So how does the concept of the Tao compare with the Christian view of God in the Bible?

Both the Tao and God are similarly credited with creating heaven and earth. This similarity may offer an initial point of contact between Christians and Taoists, a way to begin a meaningful dialogue about the nature of ultimate reality. As Christians we should always acknowledge any common ground that we might share with those from other religious perspectives. In Acts 17 Paul does this very thing when he speaks at the Areopagus in Athens. In verse 28 he quotes with approval from two pagan poets to help illustrate something of the nature of God.

But Paul also made distinctions between the Christian doctrine

of God and the views of the Athenians. In the same way, we also need to notice how the Tao differs from a biblical view of God. The greatest difference is that the Tao is impersonal whereas God is personal. The Tao is like a force, principle or energy; the Christian God is a personal being. It's crucial to realize that ultimate reality cannot be both personal and impersonal at the same time and in the same sense. Let's look at the reasons to believe that ultimate reality is personal.

Morality and the Tao

Philosophical Taoism teaches that the Tao, or ultimate reality, is impersonal. If this is so, then what becomes of morality? Can an impersonal force be the source of objective moral values that apply to all men, at all times, in all places? Is an impersonal force capable of distinguishing between good and evil? Or can such distinctions only be made by personal beings? And what of that haunting sense of obligation we all feel to do what is good and avoid what is evil? Can we be morally obligated to obey an impersonal force? Or does our nagging sense of moral obligation seem to presuppose a Moral Lawgiver to whom we are morally accountable?

Such questions are important because each of us, if we're honest, recognizes that there is an objective distinction between moral good and evil. Such distinctions are not ultimately dependent on our preferences or feelings; they are essential to the very nature of reality. But the Tao is neither capable of making such distinctions, nor of serving as the source of such objective moral values. Only a personal agent can fill such roles. "The ultimate form of the *Tao* is beyond moral distinctions."[{13}](#)

The doctrine of moral relativism is explicitly taught in the writings of Chuang-tzu. He writes, "In their own way things are all right . . . generosity, strangeness, deceit, and abnormality. The Tao identifies them all as one."[{14}](#) This

statement helps clarify why the notion of a personal God is inconsistent with Taoist philosophy. Persons make moral distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil. But according to Chuang-tzu, the impersonal Tao identifies them all as one.

This has serious implications for philosophical Taoists. If the goal of the Taoist sage is to live in harmony with the Tao, then shouldn't moral distinctions be abandoned? If the Tao makes no such distinctions, why should its followers do so? Indeed, Chuang-tzu belittles those who embrace such distinctions declaring that they "must be either stupid or wrong."[\[15\]](#)

Biblical Christianity, however, teaches that there are such things as objective moral values. The source of such values is the eternal, transcendent, holy God of the Bible. Unlike the Tao, the Christian God is not beyond moral distinctions. On the contrary, John tells us, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) And Moses describes Him as "A God of faithfulness and without injustice." (Deut. 32:4) And while Taoism proclaims an *impersonal* principle which judges no one, the Apostle Paul describes a *personal* God to whom we are morally accountable and who will one day judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31; Rom. 1:18-2:6). In summary, a personal Moral Lawgiver provides a better explanation of objective moral values than does an impersonal principle.

Persons and the Tao

We've seen that philosophical Taoism and biblical Christianity differ on the nature of ultimate reality. Taoists view ultimate reality (i.e. the Tao) as an impersonal force that brought the universe into being. Christians view ultimate reality (i.e. God) as the personal Creator of the universe. The law of non-contradiction says it's impossible for ultimate reality to be both personal and impersonal at the same time and in the same sense. Thus, if one of these views is true,

the other certainly must be false.

I argued that if objective moral values are real (and we all live as if they are), then it is more reasonable to believe that the source of such values is personal, rather than impersonal. Now I want to continue this line of thought by arguing that the existence of human persons is best explained by appealing to a personal Creator rather than to an impersonal principle like the Tao. To help us see why this is so, let's briefly consider some of the differences between a personal being and an impersonal principle.

First, personal beings (like men and women) possess such attributes as intellect, emotion, and will. That is, they have the ability to think, feel, and take considered action. An impersonal principle can do none of these things. In addition, a personal being has the ability to form and maintain relationships with other persons. But again, this is something that an impersonal force simply cannot do. If a cause must always be greater than the effect it produces, then does it make more sense to believe that the ultimate cause of human persons is personal or impersonal?

The Bible says that men and women are created in the image of God. (Gen. 1:26-27) God is described as possessing all the attributes of a personal being. He thinks, knows and understands. (Ps.139) He experiences emotions such as sorrow (Gen. 6:6) and joy. (Matt. 25:21; Jn. 15:11) He is described as working "all things after the counsel of His will." (Eph. 1:11) Finally, He is able to form and maintain relationships with other persons. (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15) Indeed, this was true even before God created anything, for from all eternity the three distinct persons of the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – have enjoyed intimate communion and fellowship with one another. (Jn. 14-17)

It's crucial to realize that the impersonal Tao possesses none of these personal attributes. But if that which is personal is

superior to that which is impersonal, then it seems more reasonable to believe that the ultimate cause of human persons must likewise be personal. And thus the personal God of the Bible provides a better explanation for the existence of human persons than does the impersonal Tao.

Evangelism and the Tao

I've emphasized that one of the crucial differences between philosophical Taoism and biblical Christianity is the nature of ultimate reality. Taoists hold that the Tao is impersonal; Christians hold that God is personal. I've argued that it is more reasonable to believe that both objective moral values and human persons come from a source that is ultimately personal rather than impersonal. I wish to conclude by providing one more line of evidence for this position.[{16}](#)

At the end of chapter 67 of the *Tao Te Ching* we read this statement: "When Heaven is to save a person, Heaven will protect him through deep love."[{17}](#) What does such a statement mean? Although it may be argued that it was simply intended as a figure of speech, it's interesting that the author should apparently feel led to ascribe personal attributes to what is supposed to be an impersonal Heaven.

For instance the phrase, "When Heaven is to save a person," seems to imply a considered action on Heaven's part. But only persons can take considered action; an impersonal force cannot do so. In addition, the second half of the sentence speaks of Heaven's protecting a person through "deep love." But an impersonal force is incapable of love. Such love seems once again to require a personal agent.

Another interesting statement from the *Tao Te Ching* occurs at the end of chapter 62:

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Why did the ancients so treasure this DAO? Is it not because

it has been said of it: “Whosoever asks will receive; whosoever has sinned will be forgiven”? Therefore is DAO the most exquisite thing on earth.[\[18\]](#)

This passage also ascribes personal attributes to the impersonal Tao. Specifically, the Tao is said to forgive sinners. This raises two difficulties. First, “forgiveness” means that a moral standard has been broken. But the *Tao* is beyond such moral distinctions!”[\[19\]](#) Second, only persons can exercise forgiveness. An impersonal force is incapable of such a thing.

Such statements may open the door for Christians to tell their Taoist friends about the deep love and forgiveness of God revealed in the Bible. Jesus spoke of God’s deep love when He said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) And the Apostle John spoke of God’s continued willingness to forgive His children when he wrote, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) Since only persons are capable of love and forgiveness, it seems more reasonable to believe that the personal God of the Bible, rather than the impersonal Tao of Taoism, is the ultimate source of such precious gifts.

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. Smith, 200.
5. Ibid.
6. *Tao-Te Ching*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 139.
7. Ibid., 152.

8. 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.

9. Robert Henricks, *Confucius, the Tao, the Ancestors, and the Buddha: The Religions of China*, in *Great World Religions: Beliefs, Practices and Histories, Part IV*

(n.p.: The Teaching Company Limited Partnership, 1998), 14.

10. Chuang Tzu, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 194.

11. Ibid., 181.

12. Dean C. Halverson and Kent Kedl, "Taoism," in *The Compact Guide to World*

Religions, ed. Dean C. Halverson (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 224.

13. Ibid.

14. Chuang Tzu, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 184.

15. Ibid., 206.

16. In this section I have relied heavily on the observations and insights of

Halverson and Kedl in *The Compact Guide to World Religions*, 227-230.

17. Tao-Te Ching, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 171.

18. Richard Wilhelm (trans. into German). *Tao Te Ching*. H.G. Oswald (trans.

into English) (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 55, cited in Halverson, ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religions*, 229.

19. Halverson, ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religions*, 229.