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Taoism

Taoism is a Chinese religion most likely founded by a man named Lao Tzu around 600 BC. Taoism is considered to be the second most influential religion among the Chinese (after Confucianism), and although its future reign as a religion is uncertain, the scriptures of the Tao Te Ching have most likely earned an undying place in history. Meaning literally, "The Way and Its Power," the Tao Te Ching is the basic text of Taoism's thought; containing 5000 characters in one small volume, and said to have been written by Lao Tzu himself.

Though controversial, Lao Tzu, also known as "the Old Boy," is considered to have been a man that led a simple and unassertive life. Contrary to the Buddha, "who trudged the dusty roads of India for forty-five years to make his point," and unlike Confucius who "pestered dukes and princes, trying to gain an administrative foothold (or at least a hearing) for his ideas," Lao Tzu is said to have never preached, organized or promoted his religion. According to thy myth, Lao Tzu eventually grew saddened by his people's reluctance to embrace his idea of natural goodness, and so he proceeded to ride westward out of town seeking a place where he could die in solitude. On his ride out, a gatekeeper supposedly convinced him to at least leave behind a record of his beliefs. Lao Tzu consented to this request, resided for three days writing the Tao Te Ching, and then returned to the gatekeeper with a slim volume of writings and continued on his journey. To this day these writings remain "a testament to humanity's at-home-ness in the universe" and he basic text of Taoism thought. (Smith 197)

The word "Tao" literally means path, or way, and can be translated into 3 different senses of the word: 1) the way to ultimate reality, 2) the way of the universe, and 3) the way of human life.

In the first sense, "the way to ultimate reality," the Tao conveys that it is so far beyond human comprehension that it can never be clearly perceived. "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." Basically, what this message is trying to reveal is that, any words that one uses to try and explain the Tao will never do it proper justice. "The Tao that can be spoken is not the true Tao." This first sense also teaches that when you are not following the Tao, and feeling it feeling it sensitively, you are left to fall back on kindness and rules of piety similar to those of Confucius. When you are falling back on concepts and ideas, rather than following the natural way of the Tao, you are accepting a pale substitute of life and not living the true Taoist way.

In the second sense, the word Tao is translated to mean "the way of the universe." Simply stated, Tao is "the norm, the rhythm, the driving power in all nature, and the ordering principle behind all life." (Smith 198) Because of its inherent nature, this sense is described as "the mother of 10,000 things." The "mother" in this expression is referring to the "source," and "10,000 things" is not literal but rather referring to the "myriad number of things." When the Tao enters this second sense, it "assumes flesh" and informs all things. It 'adapts its vivid essence, clarifies its manifold fullness, subdues its

resplendent luster, and assumes the likeness of dust.” This passage is communicating that the universe is more of a spirit than a material existence. It has no beginning and no end, flows everywhere, and cannot be exhausted. The great mother nourishes the universe and the more it is drawn upon, the more it flows.

In the third sense, Tao refers to “the way of human life” when it combines with the way of the universe discussed in the second sense. The aim of human life is to become one with the Tao, which also means to live in accordance with nature, to be great without showing greatness, and to be self-sufficient and completely independent from material and social attachments. It is when all of these things have been embraced that one is capable of achieving true happiness.

The ideal “way to human life” may be best expressed in the ideas of “the sage” which means “the ideal Taoist” or “ruler.” Properties of a sage include notions such as “when one is detached, he is one with all,” and “not collecting treasures prevents theft.” Basically, the ideal Taoist is just, honest, supple, simple, and guided by what he feels rather than what he sees. This “feeling” is not one of emotion, but more accurately a state of spiritual or mystical sensitivity. A sage accepts disgrace and misfortune, takes care of all people, and is a firm believer that “He who does not trust enough will not be trusted.”

The word “Te” literally means power, and can also be translated into three different senses of the word: 1) Philosophical Taoism, 2) Taoist Vitalizing Programs, and 3) Religious Taoism.

Philosophical Taoism, also referred to as “School Taoism” in China, is somewhat of a self-help program that guides people in what they should understand. There are teachers involved in this process, however they act more as coaches rather than professors or educators. Philosophical Taoism acts essentially as an attitude toward life, and probably because of that condition has the most to say about the world at large. This sense falls under the aspect of te in that it focuses on one’s knowledge, because to a Taoist, knowledge is power. “Knowledge that empowers life we call wisdom; and to live wisely, 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.” (Smith 200)

Taoist Vitalizing Programs are the second sense of the word “te” and refer to “chi” or “vital energy.” It references the powerful energy Taoists feel as the Tao runs through their body, giving them the drive to further its flow. In order to “maximize this flow,” the aspiring Taoists worked with matter, movement, and the workings of their own minds to accomplish this state of chi, which is the delightful energy experienced when practicing the Tao.

With respect to matter, Taoists tried eating virtually everything to see if chi could be achieved nutritionally. Developing breathing exercises and sexual experiments were additional attempts made at increasing and extending life through matter. Supplementing matter, Taoists engaged in bodily movements such as dance, meditation, and martial arts in an attempt to “draw chi from the cosmos and dislodge blocks to its internal flow.” (Smith 201) And finally, when using their own minds to accomplish chi, many Taoists practiced meditation in an attempt to empty the mind, so that the power of the Tao might have a chance to enter and run through their bodies.

Religious Taoism, the third sense of the word “te,” involves the idea that “The Taoist priesthood made cosmic life-power available for ordinary villagers.” (Smith 205) Basically, religious Taoism refers to a spiritual power that comes to someone while they

are learning the Tao. It is achievable without force and states that force only causes resistance and not progress.

In addition to the six meanings of the Tao Te Ching, there are additional concepts of the wu wei (the knowledge of when to act and when not to act) that best handle Taoist views of government and state affairs. For example, because everything in a Taoist's life functions according to the way of the Tao, it is the Tao that is responsible for all existence and is the "force" that governs everything. It governs all of change and all of life, and because of that condition, the Taoists consequentially have no concern for affairs in the state or government. To be aggressive like a politician, to plan for a community, or to even act strivingly toward something, would be contradictory to living a life of Tao. Taoists uphold all aspects of the wu wei, believing that "The way to do is to be," and that "the appropriate action is inaction." The Taoists illustrate that the soft and weak overcome the hard and strong (imagine a rock sitting in water that eventually corrodes and disintegrates), and that the good man does nothing and leaves nothing undone (by not attempting to change anything, nothing is left unfulfilled). The essence of wu wei is to let things be as they are, and cause no interferences.

Although Taoism was never practiced to perfection, "its lessons of simplicity, openness, and wisdom have provided a joyful ride for many Chinese." (Smith 218) Contrary to Confucianism, Taoism offers a less strategically ordered society and more of a natural society. Lao Tzu praises spontaneity and put the focus more on what transcends the human rather than what the human actually does. Though both religions reach out to opposite directions, Chinese societies have benefited greatly from each of them.

Works Cited

1. Smith, Huston. The World's Religions. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.