

aesthetics of calligraphy, painting, and poetry. This article compares the similarities of ours? She will discover things strange and unfathomable, repulsive and delicious. We the spiritual insights of the Tao-te ching with that of other major religions, notably the shall take them into ourselves, we shall understand them. ("The Poet" 204-5) Bahtz'£ Faith, and argues that no understanding of the Chinese mind and spirit can be complete without a perusal of some of the main spiritual tenets of this imperishable Perhaps the time is coming when women and men will understand each canon. It must be noted that this article is concerned with the original philosophy ofTao other, will be mutually supportive, will allow creativity to flourish and to enrich and not with what is today popularly known as the "Taoist religion," an invention only our communities. Women have much to offer to such a world.

loosely connected with the spiritual insights ofthe Tao-te ching.

Works Cited

Resume

Nous connaissons peu des similarites qui existent entre le Grand Tao tel que c071{;u dans 'Abdu'l-Baha. The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-BaM l'immortel livre saint Taoiste, le Tao-te ching, et la nature de Dieu et entre les during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912. Compo Howard MacNutt. enseignements des messagers de Dieu teis qu'expliques par BaM' u' lIGh et 'Abdu'l-BaM. 2d ed. Wilmette, IL: Baha'f Publishing Trust, 1982. Cet article traite du Grand Tao de l' antiquite chinoise, le Tao dont l'esprit eternel a Greer, Germaine. The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their penttre le coeur de fa tradition chinoise, de fa culture et de fa fGfon de vivre depuis des Works. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979. siecles, et qui se retrouve dans differents aspects de fa pensee chinoise, aussi bien que Helson, Ravenna. "Creativity in Women: Outer and Inner Views Over Time." In dans l' estMtique apparente de fa calligraphie, de fa peinture et de fa poesie. Cet article Theories of Creativity. Mark A. Runco and Robert S. Albert, eds. Newbury Park, compare les similarites des penetrations spirituelles dans le Tao-te ching avec celles des CA: Sage Publications, 1990. autres grandes religions, notamment la foi baM' fe, et insiste sur le fait que

nul ne peut

Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" excerpted from *comprendre l' esprit et l' ame des chinois completement sans un examen de certaines*

"Women in Sexist Societies: Studies in Power and Powerlessness." *Art News* 69 doctrines spirituelles de ce livre inunortel. Il faut noter que cet article se preoccupe de fa (January 1971): 22-39.

Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. philosophie premiere du Tao et non de sa popularite actuelle connue sous le nom de New York: W. W. Norton, 1985.

«Religion Taaiste», une invention seulement legerement connectee avec la conception

Rimbaud, Arthur. "The Poet as Revolutionary Seer." In *The Modern Tradition*. Richard spirituelle du Tao-te ching. Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Root, Martha.)ihirih the Pure. Rev. ed. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1981.

Resumen

Tyng, Anne Griswold. "From Muse to Heroine: Toward a Visible Creative Identity." In Poco se conoce acerca de las semejanzas compartidas entre el Gran Tao segun se

Architecture: A Place for Women. Ellen Perry Berkeley, ed. Washington: concibe en el Tao-te ching, el canon inmortal Taoista, y la naturaleza de Dios y las Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

enseñanzas de Sus Mensajeros segUn lo exponen Bahd~u' lldh y 'Abdu'l-Bahd. Esta

Women: Extracts from the Writings of BaM' u'lltih, 'Abdu'I-BaM, Shoghi Effendi, and disertacwn enfoca sobre el Gran Tao del antiguo pueblo chino, un Tao cuyo esp{ritu

the Universal House of Justice. Compo Research Dept. Baha'f World Centre. eterno se ha entraiido a traves de los siglos en lo mas hondo de la tradicwn, cultura, y

Thornhill, ON: Baha'f Canada Publications, 1986.

modo de vida chino, y que se presenta en los varios aspectos del pensamiento y vivir

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room ofOne's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957.

chino y tambien en la estetica que resalta aun mas en su caligrafia, pintura. ypoesia. El

- - - . *A Writer's Diary*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1954.

escrito campara las semejanzas de los discernimientos espirituales del Tao-te ching con

aquellas de otras religiones principales, en particular la Fe BaJui' {, y
 razona que la that there is no Chinese word that corresponds exactly to
 the word religion. To
 comprensión de la mente y el esp{ritu chino no podra considerarse completa sin
 una the Chinese, there is no difference between religion and
 education. The Chinese
 lectura afondo de las doetrinas centrales de este canon imperecedero. Vale
 tomar en word chiao (teaching) includes all religions. Both "teaching"
 and "learning"
 cuenta que esta disertacwn se concierne con la filosof{a original del Tao y no
 con 10 que
 have the purpose of bringing enlightenment. A great teacher teaches one to
 hoy se conoce popularmente corrw la "religion Taoista," una invenci6n s610
 vagamente
 conectada con los discernimientos espirituales del Tao-te ching.
 understand the great principle of life and the universe, how to reach the.good
 and to appreciate the beautiful. Although the Chinese notion of "teaching";
 does
 not indicate an explicit belief in God, it is incorrect to say that the Chinese
 do
 Something there is without fonn and complete, not believe
 in God, or what is otherwise referred to as the Absolute Truth, the
 Born before heaven and earth, Ultimate
 Reality, or the Eternal Ground of Being) Sprinkled throughout the
 Solitary and vast, Tao-te
 ching and other major Chinese classical texts are references to the
 Standing alone without change, presence of
 the Great Tao. 4
 Everywhere pervading all things, The
 essence of Chinese religion-of which a significant part is contributed
 Mothering all beneath heaven. by
 Taoism-can be said to comprise the belief in the presence of a Great Tao
 I don't know its name; that is
 unknowable. Referred to often by the Chinese word heaven, the Great
 I style it Tao, Tao was not
 so much the personal Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the world such
 And for want of a name call it great. as the God
 of Jews and Christians, but rather, the remote, absolute, and ultimate
 (Ch.25)1
 reality that cannot logically be well defined. There is also a realization that
 the
 love of the Great Tao is embodied in all created things. S This belief that all
 T here should not be a problem in naming what has generally been believed to
 be the "philosophy" of Lao-tzu (and for that matter, Confucius) a religion,
 things reflect the image of God encouraged the Chinese to strive for

unity or wholeness in general. The Chinese temperament seeks a union of the ideal and if one considers Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "ultimate concern" (Scharlemann, Paul Tillich 231) and A. N. Whitehead's concept of religion as real, and of heaven and earth. Its perspective is synthetic rather than analytic. A "the art of the internal life of man" (Religion 16). Julian Huxley's concept of harmonious and peaceful life with the sense of unity or wholeness is the ideal religion as a way of life, an inner awareness, and a sublimation, is also similar life in Chinese tradition. Such a way of life is called Tao, and it is the essence to the Chinese approach to religion (Religion). The Chinese concept of and goal of the Chinese mind, at least in the traditional sense. Thus, the contemplating the intrinsic value of things is also similar to Einstein's concept traditional Chinese attitude was for tolerance instead of ideological opposition, of wonder and the experience of the mysterious in daily routine. since the sense of unity and wholeness led the Chinese mind towards the sense In addition, the Chinese cosmological view of life, particularly the Chinese of relativity of particulars within the universal totality.⁶ concept of the mandate of heaven descending upon humanity and all things, A part of the essence of traditional Chinese belief is that wise sages from corresponds to the worldview of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose central idea time to time will come to show the path to enlightenment There is a Chinese is that God permeates all things and that human beings can encounter God in their own actions (Divine 122, 141). The Chinese believe that the love of

3. If it is occasionally expressed in certain circles that the Chinese do not believe in heaven is in all creatures and that in meeting the creatures, humankind God, it is because the word God has all the wrong "Western" connotations. There is the encounters God. The divine love energy is the unifying power of the universe. conception first of all in the Chinese mind of an old man with a long white beard, or the The universe has consciousness and is progressing toward the Great Unity that evangelizing God of the Christian missionaries saving sinners and eradicating idolatry Teilhard de Chardin calls the "Omega point." The power of love unifies and from the land of the heathens.

4. See, for example, the works of Mencius, Confucius, and Chuang-tzu in Wing-tsit spiritualizes all things. 2

Chan, A Sourcebook.

However, although we may refer to a Chinese religion, we should note here

5. "The Great Tao is simple and near because He is present in everything"

(Mencius

VIIA, 41). Confucius also said that "God is not far from man" (poetrine ofthe

Mean 13: 1).

1. For convenience, I shall refer to all quotations from the Tao-te ching by

simply 6. There may be an argument here that Communist China is an
anti-traditional and

putting "ch." for "chapter" after each quotation. All quotations from the

Tao-te ching are relatively intolerant society, but we must remember that

Chinese communism is only

taken from Herrymon Maurer, translator, Tao: The Way ofthe Ways.

fifty years old in relation to a tradition of spirituality that is
more tha. l three-thousand

2. See Chih, Chinese Humanism passim, for an elaboration.

years old and which has not been completely eradicated.

14 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI.'f STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

15

belief that every 500 years, a sage would come to show the Way (Chan,

China. 9 Nevertheless, whatever ideas Lao-tzu may have derived from
the

Religious 24). This does not mean that only the literate or those in personal

ancient Chinese cultural heritage must have been spiritually digested
by him

contact with the sage can be fortunate enough to comprehend and walk: the way

before expression in his unique and inimitable style. One may
conclude that

of the Great Tao, for Tao can be found in the simplest things of the world.

Lao-tzu's great contribution was his gathering together all the
spiritual wisdom

scattered throughout ancient documents and putting them in a small volume.

Lao-tzu and the Tao-te ching

A word now on the Tao-te ching, believed to be the most
translated work

The most famous exposition of the Tao is found in the Tao-te ching. It was

next to the Bible. Indeed, the Tao-te ching has been called the
Chinese Bible. It

composed sometime in the sixth century BC. To that remarkable century also

can be said that not even the Confucian doctrine can approach the
Tao-te ching

belong the writings of the Buddha, Jeremiah, and Confucius. The Tao-te ching

in popularity and prestige. Its influence has been circumscribed,
however, by

is believed to have been written by Lao-tzu, said to be the first ancient sage

of the fact that even the best translation would fail to do it justice because there are

China, who dedicated his whole life to the study of Tao (Sih, Chinese untranslatable, subtle images and rhythms in the original work. Unfortunately,

Humanism 53). However, we cannot be sure of his real name. Lao-tzu is a these untranslatable aspects are the very factors that arouse human intuition as

description rather than an appellation. The term can mean "old philosopher" or to the nature of essential truths.

"old sir," but it can also mean "old child" or "old fellow." Perhaps following his In relation to its small size (some five-thousand characters), the influence

own dictates of not being attached to names, Lao-tzu kept himself so well directly or indirectly exerted by this extraordinary work on Chinese life and

hidden that very little is known of him except what he wrote.

culture is profound and far-reaching. Expounding a consistent and coherent

The story goes that Lao-tzu was a custodian at the imperial archives in the view of life and the universe, it has, for instance, contributed considerably

State of Chou and as such had access to the ancient books of China However, towards the development of various classical schools of Chinese philosophy,

being disillusioned with the depravity of the nobility's conduct and their notably, those established by Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 BC), a great leader of the

oppression of the peasants and slaves, as well as the frequent warfare between Legalist School, and Chuang-tzu (369-286 BC), second only to Lao-tzu as a

divided States, he departed from China as a sign of protest, to live outside its Taoist mystic and philosopher. By raising the spiritual consciousness of the

borders.? The officer of the frontier, Yin Hsi, noted Lao-tzu's intention and took Chinese people,¹⁰ the Tao-te ching also facilitated the introduction of Buddhism

the opportunity to urge him to write a book before leaving. Lao-tzu took up the into China. Not only did the work play a major role in the development of

suggestion and wrote a book discussing Tao and virtue. At first, the work was Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, it also strengthened the metaphysical aspect of

simply called Lao-tzu. Later, during the Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 9), the work Confucianism and contributed to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the

was dignified with the title Tao-te ching (Classic of the Way and its Virtue).

Sung Dynasty (AD 960-1279).

The book can be divided into two parts: the first being on the metaphysical, a

Like all the great religions, Taoism has contributed towards the pool of not treatment of the ultimate reality (ch. 1-37) and the second being on the only the spiritual but also the material knowledge of humankind. The practical, a description of how to live in this world (ch. 38-81).⁸ development of such sciences as chemistry, mineralogy, and geography in China

Although the Tao-te ching is generally traced to Lao-tzu, many of its basic can be traced to Taoism (Needham, Science). In addition, Taoism has also played

ideas are scattered in earlier writings, such as the I Ching (Book of Changes) a signal part in the development of medicine, acupuncture, and the practical arts

and Shu Ching (Book of History), traditionally considered the oldest books in and crafts, as well as alchemy, astrology, divination, and martial art (kung fu).!!

Not surprisingly, in the course of succeeding centuries, commentaries on the

7. This account is attributed to his early biographer, Ssu-ma Ch'ien. However, this 9. Lao-tzu (as well as Confucius) drew heavily from the Shu of The Book of

account has mixed fact and fantasy, as it lists a few titles and places Lao-tzu may have Documents although he did not quote explicitly from this or other books (Sih, Chinese possibly frequented, but it also contains some quite fantastic and absurd speculations. Humanism 53).

See B. Watson, translator, Ssu-Ma Ch'ien: Records of the Grand Historian of China.

10. According to Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-BaM often spoke "in most hopeful words"

8. Although it has been translated into English as The Way and its Power by Arthur of "its brilliant future and of the spiritual capacity of its people" (letters written on behalf

Waley in the book of the same title, the title need not be interpreted as logically of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, 26 January 1923. In "A Compilation on China."

connecting Tao with Te. However, due to recent archeological work in China, we are 11. Needham's treatise "Fundamental ideas of Chinese Science" in volume 2 of

now sure that these terms were applied to the respective halves of the work as early as Science and Civilization in China provides valuable reading for the understanding of

the beginning of the Han Dynasty. See Lau (Chinese Classics).

Yin-Yang and the Five Elements.

16 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

Tao-te ching have come out in great profusion, attesting to the immense interest As a result of the little known but remarkable similarities of the teachings of and importance attached to this work. About 1,000 such commentaries are Lao-tzu with those of Baha'u'llah (and indeed of the other founders of the great known to exist-some 500 in Chinese, over 250 in Japanese, and a small religions), as well as the enduring quality of Lao-tzu's work, the intriguing number in Western languages (Wei, Guiding 5). There have also been numerous question of whether Lao-tzu was a sage or a prophet is then posed. translations of the Taoist canon. 12 The earliest translation was in Sanskrit and done by Tripitaka-Master Hsuan Tsang, a Buddhist luminary of the Tang Dynasty. The next translation was in Latin and appeared about 1750. It was While "God" was the supreme concept in the West in terms of questions apparently done by a Jesuit missionary who had been to China. In 1828, the first regarding the highest reality, "Dharma" (truth or law) took its place in the Indian Russian version appeared and forty years later, the English version. Today, tradition. In the Chinese tradition, "heaven" and "Tao" occupied the place of the there are upwards of forty English translations in the field, vying with one highest reality; and of the two, Tao was the most important concern. another for superior merit 13

Due to its intrinsic popularity, as well as the recent successes of books such as *The Tao of Physics*, the word Tao has now gained currency and is listed in is complete without a perusal of this imperishable canon, especially in relation well-known English dictionaries. 14 However, such dictionaries describe Tao to the latest religious revelation, the Baha'i Faith. I would like now to compare simply as a "way" or "path." This definition is correct in a literal sense but is these two great belief systems, separated, it would seem at first, by a vast not complete. One should note that besides indicating the multifarious ways of geographical gulf and historical span of time. On deeper examination, however, communicating with this ultimate reality, Tao also denotes the ultimate reality a remarkable similarity surfaces that is especially apparent in Baha'i and Taoist in Chinese religious experience. Tao means both the Way as

Principle and the

. expositions on the nature and the teachings of the Great Tao.

Way as the means to realize the principle (cf Chiu, *The Tao* 403).

We note as

In terms of the nature of Tao, both Taoism and the Baha'i Faith refer to Tao

well that Tao is the common term used by all Chinese religious thinkers

to

as immanent, transcendent, and unknowable; both teach that great virtue exists

denote the essence of religion. It is used to exemplify their

understanding of the

in following Tao alone; that all spiritual truth comes from the same source;

and most subtle nature of religious experience. Tao means both the

essence and

that these truths are expounded by sages who are unfortunately not recognized

manifestation of religion. Because it is often beyond categories of

knowledge,

during their lifetimes by the great masses of humanity. Where the teachings of

Tao can only be defined by such negative terms as wu (nothingness

or non-

Tao are concerned, striking similarities are found with regard to the mutual

call being), wu-chih (non-ultimate), and kung (emptiness). But there

are also

for abstinence from actions contrary to nature (wu-wei); the importance of an

positive expressions such as Shang Ti (the supreme lord), T'ien

(heaven) and

unbiased mind in the search for truth; the advocacy of humility, forgiveness,

Tao (the way or the principle).

justice, contentment, and moderation; and the emphasis on deeds over words.

Immanent, Transcendent, and Unknowable

12. The translations cannot be said to have served the Tao-te ching well

because the For Lao-tzu, "the world is a sacred vessel" (ch. 29), and the

intent of the Tao-te

nature of the work attracted many whose enthusiasm for Eastern mysticism far

ching is to speak about the unspeakable and to discourse on the

unknowable.

outstripped their acquaintance with Chinese thought or Chinese language.

Like the first chapter of *Gleanings from the Writings of BaM' u'*

lltih, the first

13. Some scholarly translation is somewhat contradictory, but it is possible to

aim at chapter of the Tao-te ching expounds on the immanent and the

transcendent

exactness. The translation I am using and with which I am most impressed is

that of

aspect of Tao:

Herrymon Maurer. Maurer's translation is not only recent (1986) but also

appealing, as

he tries to preserve the force, the rhythm, the repetitions, and the

parallelism of the original and even attempts a pun or two and an occasional rhyme. He declines to defer to the conceptual habits of other translations by rendering such terms of Chinese concreteness as "the ten thousand things," "the hundred families," and "beneath heaven" Has a name: mother of ten thousand things ... into such abstractions as "all things," "the people," and "the world." The manner in which the Way is presented is itself the Way. Generally, Maurer tries to tamper least (Ch. 1) with the original terseness and impact. He makes no effort to explain the inexplicable and also avoids trying to make clear what is not clear, leaving unclear the unclear. It should be mentioned here that Maurer's translation draws heavily from that of John C.

14. See, for example, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, Random House H. Wu's Lao Tzu / Tao Teh Ching.

Dictionary, and the Concise Oxford Dictionary.

18 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

19

Tao here is the origin of the universe and "mother" of all things (ch. 1). It is deeply influenced by the Tao-te ching, Chuang-lzu,¹⁵ a literary genius with transcendent and defies being named. The Tao-te ching continues to expound profound spiritual insight, composed many verses on the nature of Tao. With that Tao is shapeless, soundless, and bodiless (ch. 14). Throughout the first half of the text, the descriptions used to suggest Tao's nature are that it is cloudy, formless, obscure, elusive, silent, and void. Tao is essentially indefinable in human language and inexplicable by human reasoning. Tao cannot be understood as "God" in the sense of ruler, monarch, commander, architect, and confidence in the Tao. The following two quotations on the

nature of the

shaper, or maker of the universe. In fact, any imagery associated with Tao is

Tao are typically Chuang-Izu's:

more maternal (denoting "a creative force") than paternal (see opening quotation). The image of the military and political overlord is not in the idea of ... it [Tao] may be obtained, but cannot be seen. Before heaven

and earth were, Tao

Tao. There is, then, an interesting similarity between the metaphysics of Tao in was. It has existed without change from all time. Spiritual

beings drew their

Taoism and Brahman in Hinduism. Both Tao and Brahman are in essence and spirituality therefrom, which the universe became what we can see

now. To Tao, the

zenith is not high, nor the nadir low; no point in time is long ago, nor by lapses of age

in themselves indescribable and nameless; while in manifestation and function, has it grown old. (Quoted in Giles, Chuang Tzu 76)

both are identifiable with many and all things in the universe. In the Baha'i writings, this is given expression:

Sometimes, Chuang-tzu enters into an I-thou relation with the Tao reminiscent of a Baha'i prayer:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine

o My Master, O my Master. Thou who destroyest all things, and dost not account it

Essence. (BaM'u'llah, Gleanings 3-4)

cruelty; thou who benefittest all time, and does not account it charity; thou who art

older than antiquity, and dost not account it age; thou who supportest the universe,

For Lao-Izu to postulate a similar conception of the Supreme Ultimate at so shaping the many forms therein, and dost not account it skill;-this is the happiness

early a date was truly remarkable. The ancient Chinese notion of T ien (heaven) of God! (Quoted in Giles, Chuang Tzu 132)

or Ti (Supreme God), as represented in the songs and hymns of The Book of the Odes, was that of a knowing, feeling, loving, and hating supreme ruler of

The many titles of Tao referred to by Chuang-Izu include the Great Negative

humankind and the universe. The fate of humankind was also supposed to be in (Omnipotent), the Great One (Omnipresent), the Great Law (i.e., Perfection), the

the hands of all kinds of gods and spirits. In place of such an anthropomorphic Great Nomenclature (All-Inclusive), the Great Uniformity (All-Assimilative), the

deity or deities, an entirely new rational and logical concept of God was

proposed. Great Eye (i.e., the Omniscient), as well as the Great Space,
the Great Truth, and
In addition, the true Taoist knows that Tao is not only the Way but also the
the Great Unity (Giles, Chuang Tzu 247, passim). This is a forerunner of
the
Origin and End of all things, yet it cannot be identified with anything in
many titles of BaM to be revealed by Baha'u'llah, such as Most Great
Spirit,
particular. Immanent in the universe, it nonetheless transcends the universe.
It is Pre-existent Root, Supreme Heaven, and the Most Great Name. I?
the mystery of mysteries that evokes in the minds of thinking people a
perennial
sense of wonder. Taoism never hides the mysterious nature of Tao. In fact,
Following Tao Alone
Taoism glorifies Tao. The wiser the person, the more amazed he or she is by
The Tao-te ching advocates that the nature of great virtue is to
follow Tao alone
this mystery. Only ignorant fools think that they know (ch. 22, 24, passim).
(ch. 21). In being in harmony with Tao, everything is made
whole-there are no
BaM'u'liah expresses this feeling:
metaphorical demons or spirits to upset the people's constitution:

How can I claim to have known Thee, when the entire creation is bewildered by
Thy

15. Chuang-tzu's date of birth is unknown. All we can say is that he was a
younger
mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, 10, the whole
contemporary of Mencius (371-289 Be).
universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy Truth? (Gleanings 63)
16. One notes that Chuang-tzu's book, together with the Tao-te ching, has been
a
source of inspiration to Chinese scholars and poets through the centuries.

Although it
The Bab reaffirms the same eternal truth that there is no beginning and no end
deals with roughly the same subject, it is however ten times larger than
the TGO-te ching.

to this awesome mystery that had dawned on the Chinese people early in the

17. For a compilation of the many titles of BaJui, see RUI]fyyih
Rabbanf, camp., The
history of humankind (The Bab, Selections 91, 125; Baha'u'llah, Tablets 140).
Desire of the World 177-81.

20 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES
4.2.1991 The Great Tao

When beneath-heaven is ruled with Tao,
If I have a grain of wisdom,

Demons don't go spiriting.

I walk along the great Tao
Not only do the demons not spirit,
And only fear to stray.
But the spirits don't harm people.

(Ch. 53)

(Ch.60)

Just as the sun rises on both the evil and good and sends rain on both the just
This is not dissimilar from the Baha'i belief that "the beginning of all things
is and unjust, one characteristic of the Great Tao, as reflected
in the character of the
the knowledge of God ..." (BaM'u'llah, Gleanings 5) and the admonition by
sage, is that it does not differentiate, but rather, loves all
nature and all humanity: 18

Baha'u'llah:

The sage has no fixed heart.

... Barter not away this Youth, O people, for the vanities of this world or the
delights He frods his heart

of heaven. By the righteousness of the one true God! One hair of Him excelleth
all In the hundred families' heart,

that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth. Beware, O men, lest ye be
tempted He is good to the good;

to part with Him in exchange for the gold and silver ye possess. (Gleanings 38)

He is also good to the not-good,

For virtue is good.

Great virtue comprises the recognition that everything stems from the Tao and

He is faithful to the faithful;

He is also faithful to the unfaithful,

that true happiness and peace of mind rest in adhering to its principles, not
in

For virtue is faithful.

bartering them away.

(Ch.49)

The immortality of the spirit as mentioned in the holy books is the
fundamental basis of the divine religions. Similarly, the Tao-te ching affirms

Virtue (Te) in the above quotation is not so much virtue in the
sense of moral

immortality for those who adhere to Tao:

rectitude, but rather, "virtuality" in the sense of having the
possession of

force or power. It is a Te that is believed by the ancient Chinese to be

It is said that

manifest in, for example, the miraculous fruition of plants and the

He who preserves his life

unconscious circulation of blood.

Meets no tigers or wild buffaloes on the road

Remains untouched by weapons in the wars.

This bounty and generosity of Tao, however, does not mean that Tao does
In him the wild buffalo not
take an active hand in redressing inequities. "The Tao of Heaven plays no
Finds no space for his horns,
favorites, I But it always succors the good" (ch. 79). Here, it is interesting
to

the tiger no space for his claws note
that the otherwise impersonal and remote Tao gives way to a more
the soldier no space for his blade.
personified conception of activity and differentiation.

How is this?

Because there is no place for death in him. The

Same Source

(Ch. 50; also ch. 16,52) Being significantly and
spiritually ahead of his time, Lao-tzu advanced the
notion that all the great spiritual truths come from the same source and that,
in

Accordingly, the Tao-te ching expounds that it is natural for human beings
reality, there is no difference between their persons, words,
messages, acts, and

to turn to Tao and that separation from Tao is unnatural. Tao gives life,
nurses, manners. Thus, very early in Chinese history, the Chinese
people realized that

rears, nurtures, shelters, comforts, feeds, and protects (ch. 51). Thus, every
each religion contained something intrinsically good and
valuable. The

creature that is conscious of its origin has a natural and intimate kinship
with acknowledgement of mutual goodness in all religions
eventually led to the

Tao. Tao is like the mother to the newborn (ch. 25). Logically, then, turning
towards Tao is life, and turning away is death. Being on the path is as life-
giving as reaching the end of it, while being off the path is more

death-dealing 18. Baha'u'llah says something similar: "Thou
art the All-Bountiful, the
than ignorance of where the path leads:

overflowing showers of Whose mercy have rained down upon high
and low alike, and

the splendors of Whose grace have been shed over both the obedient and the
rebellious"

(Prayers and Meditations 250; Divine Art of Living 12). See also the Bible,
Matthew

5:44-45 for a similar idea.

22 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

realization that all religions are harmonious in having the same origin and

goal. Lao-tzu broke the conventions of the day. In his time, he was against the

The unity of all religions has thus become one of the tacit understandings of the autocratic, the patriarchal, the hierarchic, the superstitious, the ritualistic, the Chinese people:

oppressive, and the violent Such opposition was indeed unconventional. His life was also scandalous. He withdrew from Chinese civilization to live outside the Chinese border with people whom the Chinese considered barbarians. Just as Call the sameness mystery: Jesus' dying the death of a criminal was a great scandal to the Romans, so Mystery of mystery, the door to inwardness. similarly was Lao-tzu's departure to the country of the barbarians, a scandal to

(Ch.1)

the Chinese. The Chinese had traditionally believed themselves to be more intelligent, more cultured, and more capable than other races. Throughout their history, the Chinese had put down the "barbarians" to the north and west of their country, just as the Jews had put down the temple prostitutes and the Romans, officials and intellectuals began to develop a new metaphysics that they called the subversives. Thus, the flight of Lao-tzu to the country of the despised "the way to heaven" and which could encompass all philosophical and religious ideas. Berling describes the way to heaven as follows:

sage's denunciation of the trappings of material and conventional success.

So it is that people, especially the intelligentsia, do not usually recognize a This belief in the Unity of the way of heaven established a foundation of syncretic sage during the sage's lifetime: "The great Tao is easy indeed / but the people thought; unless religious ideas could be shown to be outright fantasies they had some choose bypaths" (ch. 53). And Lao-tzu, reminiscent of the founders of past religions, refers to this lack of recognition and acceptance: 19 rectified; the believers were seldom called upon to choose one God or one truth over

all others. The way of Heaven included all Truths of men. (Syncretic Religion 20-23)

My words are very easy to know,
Very easy to follow;

As the Taoist Ku Huan (c. 392-453) puts it, "Taoism and Buddhism are equal
But beneath-heaven can't know them,

in illuminating and transforming people." Different religions develop under a
Can't follow them.

variety of conditions to meet basic needs of the times, but they are all
(Ch. 70; see also ch. 78)

"convenient means" to the same end (quoted in Chan, "Historic" 122). This idea
can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the
same

He acknowledges that only the truly spiritual can see beyond
the personality of

river may start off at different points and time, bearing different names, but
the

the sage to recognize the original Source, which throughout
history has always

supply of water content that each receives from its sources does not vary. It
is the

been the same:
water rather than the name of the tributaries that serves a purpose for
humanity.

My words have an ancestor;

My deeds have a lord.

The Mission of the Sage

People don't know Him,

Unfortunately, spiritual leaders with revolutionary "new" insights are never

So they don't know me.

loved during their lifetime and especially not among their own people. Indeed,

(Ch.70)

Lao-tzu was considered heretical and odd and his teachings incongruous with
the current social trends:

Despite receiving a possibly cool reception, a sage continues to
work tirelessly

to return the people to the light-the Great Tao, the Universal Law or Truth,
the

All bepeath heaven say

Right

Way:

My Tao seems like folly.

But it is great

because it seems like folly.

Were it not like folly,

Long indeed would it have been petty.

19.

Jesus, for example, quotes Isaiah: "You will hear and hear and never
understand.

(Ch.67)

You will see and see and never

perceive" (Matthew 13:14).

24 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

Therefore the Sage ... the Tao, and
 thus one's action will be successful. It is easier to sail with the
 Returns the people to what they have lost, wind than
 against it.²⁰

Helps all things find their nature. Wu
 elaborates on the connotations of wu-wei and describes it as comprising
 (Ch.64) two aspects: physical and mental ("Taoism"
 54). Physically, wu-wei implies
 that one's actions should not exceed what is essential to the accomplishment of
 The central mission of the founders of the world religions can be said to be
 a given aim. One should not engage in activity for activity's sake. Mentally,
 wu-
 focussed on lifting the people "from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them
 wei implies that even if we are called upon to perform a necessary
 function for
 to the light of true understanding" as well as "to ensure the peace and
 the welfare of the people, and even if we have accomplished our work, we
 must
 tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be
 never be attached to what we have done, knowing that our true happiness
 does
 established" (Baha'u'llah, Gleanings 79-80). With this in mind, the sage is
 thus not lie in what we do, but in what we are. "Do your work, retire: This
 is the Tao
 the exemplar par excellence, an epitome of the ideal character-humble,
 of Heaven" (ch. 9).
 selfless, and spiritual-the sage's life being an example of how one may walk
 Applied to practical life, wu-wei basically refers to the abstinence
 from
 along the path of Tao. Throughout the Tao-te ching, numerous verses expound
 action that is contrary to nature. According the Tao-te ching, "flowing
 with the
 the sage's behavior as one who desires but is desireless (ch. 74), loving,
 brave, Tao" means following the key principles of humanity, that is,
 inculcating the
 simple, and generous (ch. 67), as one who conquers without competing, answers
 values of humility, forgiveness, justice, contentment, and moderation,
 and
 without speaking, attracts without summoning (ch. 73), and one who completes
 emphasizing deeds rather than words in one's daily life. 21
 work but takes no credit (ch. 77).

The Unbiased Mind

The sage knows himself, One should
 first empty oneself of all human learning so as to be objective in the
 But makes no show of himself. partaking

of divine knowledge. Baha'u'llah exhorts us to empty ourselves of all
Loves himself, learning so
that we may partake of divine knowledge (Hidden Words 25). 'Abdu'l-
But does not exalt himself. BaM warns
that "with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on
He rejects the outward, error and
indifference to God" (Selections 110). In a letter to the intellectuals of the
Accepts the inward.
court of the Shah in Persia, Baha'u'llah begged them "not to depend upon their
(Ch.72)

intellect, their comprehension and learning ..." (Kittib-i-iqan 248).
To show the importance of an unbiased mind in the search for Truth, the
Tao-te ching frequently uses metaphor to describe a human being's
The Teachings of Tao

uncontaminated nature, likening it to the "uncarved wood" (ch. 15), "the
innocence of a spewing infant" (ch. 10), "the seeming obscurity of muddy
Tao never does anything,
And everything gets done.
water" (ch.15), and "the openness of a valley" (ch. 15). Lao-lzu believes that
a

(Ch.37) human being's original nature
is constant although its pristine simplicity has
been smothered by layers upon layers of the "kn.owledge" and "desire"
Wu-wei

generated in a contrived and unnatural society. For Lao-lzu, this
encrustation of
These often-quoted words denoting the Taoist doctrine of wu-wei should not be
social norms, values, and conventional erudition can be pared away
through a
taken literally to mean inertia, laziness, laissez-faire, or mere passivity.
Wu-wei cultivation of the Taoist way and a return to the beginning:
can be generally defined as the act of following the natural order flowing in
the

current of Tao, something that Needham refers to as "refraining from activity
20. One may note here that in, for example, the martial art of
aikido, an opponent

contrary to nature" (Science 88), justifying this statement with a quotation
from may be defeated by the force of his own attack. With great skill, one
can throw an

Chuang-lzu: "Non-action does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let
attacker to the floor without the attacker being touched. This is because
force is not

everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be
directly opposed, but rather given way to and redirected. A

Taoist-derived aikido
satisfied" (quoted in Needham, Science 68-69). If one refrains from acting
principle is "flexibility and softness masters hardness; in yielding

there is strength."

contrary to nature or going against the grain of things, one is in harmony with

21. This is only a brief summary of the main tenets of the Tao-te ching. No mere

article can hope to list comprehensively what this classic teaches.

26 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

27

To get learning, add to it daily.

Without looking out of the window

To get Tao, subtract daily.

You can see heaven's way.

Subtract and subtract

The further you go,

Until you achieve nothing-doing

the less you know.

Do nothing-doing

(Ch.47)

and everything will get done.

(Ch.48)

Indeed, Lao-tzu warns that

"the wise are not learned; / the learned are not

wise" (ch. 81), as learning is more often a hindrance than an aid to spiritual

The Tao-te ching stresses that one must unlearn conventional knowledge and

insights. 23 In this context, Tao is attained not by knowledge, but rather, by an

reject all artificially established values before one can return to a natural

and absence of knowledge.

uncontaminated state. The cultural accumulation around one's original nature- the unnatural carving of the "unearved wood"-represents a real deterioration of

Humility

the human condition. Truth will only be distorted if seen through prejudiced

eyes. The truly great in religious history have been those who thought least of their

Lao-tzu goes on to elaborate on the fact that most people see the concrete aspect own glory or interests and were focussed only on giving peace and rest to the

of the wheel, vessel, or room, not realizing that its utility lies in its

hollowness: people. "Therefore the sage / Puts himself last, / Finds himself first; / Abandons

his self, / Preserves his self. / Is it not because he has no self, / That he is able to

Thirty spokes share one hub; realize

his self?" (ch. 7); "The Way of Heaven is / To benefit but not to harm";

In emptiness lies the wheel's utility.

and "the way of the Sage is / To work but not compete" (ch. 81). Many of the

Kneading clay makes a pot;

verses in the Tao-te ching that extol the life of the sage remind us of the life led

In emptiness lies the pot's utility.

Cutting doors and windows makes a room, by "the

Servant of Baha," 'Abdu'l-Baha:

In emptiness lies the room's utility.

The sage does not hoard,

(Ch. II)

The more he does for others,

The more he has himself.

Tao is to be known by "nothing-knowing," a clear and unobstructed state of mind,

The more he gives,

made possible only by first emptying oneself of all human learning. The mind

The more he gets,

should be opened to Tao by absorbing and becoming intimate with it and not by

(Ch.8)

building mental constructions on top of it. 22 This statement is equivalent to the

saying that one should be cleansed "from the idle sayings of men"

(Bah:i'u'llah, Perhaps the central insight of the Tao-te ching is

that lowliness or humility is

Kitab-i-fqan 70) and "cast away ... the things [we] have composed with the pen

the foundation of greatness. "Pride in wealth and fame breeds its own

collapse"

of ... idle fancies and vain imaginings" (Baha'u'llah, Epistle 98).

(ch. 9). Therefore, the sage

"Nothing-knowing" can be achieved not only by the learned but also by the common people. As in past revelations, people devoid of learning have

holds to the One and

comprehended the Truth, a power whose reality some of learning have failed to

Becomes beneath-heaven's model.

grasp (BaM'u'llah, Tablets 142,235-36). This concept is perhaps most clearly

He does not show himself,

exemplified in the recognition of Christ by the illiterate and the rejection of

Hence he shines.

Christ by the intellectuals of his time.

Does not assert himself,

Hence he is seen.

Without going out of the door

Does not boast his merits,

You can know beneath-heaven.

Hence he gets credit.

22. This is a far cry from our current Faustian way of thinking or the

scientific 23. Unfortunately, these lines by Lao-tzu have often been misunderstood by scholars

method of controlling nature through understanding it, conceptualizing it, cutting it as showing a sort of negative, passive attitude and a philosophy of withdrawal. See, for

down to human size, and subjecting it to the operations of the intellect.

instance, Yong, *Oriental Thought* 69.

28 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991

The Great Tao

29

Does not vaunt himself,

The weak overcome the strong;

Hence he survives.

The soft overcome the hard.

Does not compete with anyone,

There is no one beneath heaven

Hence no one beneath heaven

Who doesn't know this,

Can compete with him.

And no one who practices it.

(Ch.22)

Therefore

the sage says:

To bear the dirt of the country

The Tao-te ching is the source of the often-quoted saying that only from low

Is to be master of the grain-shrines

places is it possible to look upon heaven and earth. From high places, the

to bear the sins of the country

temptation is to look down on earth and think oneself superior to it. Chinese

Is to be lord of beneath-heaven.

landscape painters, for instance, always lifted their eyes up into the hills,

never

(Ch.78)25

looked down from them:

This philosophy of gentleness and softness, meekness and humility stems

Rivers and seas become kings of the valleys from the

concept that power and weakness, being and non-being, and success

Because they lie lower: and

failure are all relative to one another. All things turn from life to death and

That is why they become kings. from

death to life. If one tries to weaken others, one becomes strong. According

Hence the sage, to

Taoism, softness overcomes toughness. The Taoist notion here foreshadows

wishing to be higher than the people, the words

of Jesus five-hundred years later: "Blessed are the meek, for they

Keeps his speech lower;

shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Wishing to lead the people,

Puts himself behind them.

(Ch.66)

Forgiveness and Justice

Faithful to the theme of the revealed religions, the Tao-te ching balances the concept

A central metaphor in the Tao-te ching is water, and Lao-tzu equates water of forgiveness with justice. It calls for requiting hatred with virtue (ch. 3):²⁶

with the highest form of goodness. Water knows how to benefit all things

Why did the ancients prize Tao?

without competing with them. Water stays in crevices and unattractive low-

Because if it is sought, it is found;

lying areas not often frequented and usually loathed by humans. "Therefore it

Because the guilty are forgiven.

comes near to the Tao" (ch. 24). The paradox is that nothing is as soft or as

That is why it is beneath-heaven's treasure.

weak as water, yet nothing is better to attack the hard and strong through

(Ch.62)

attritional action, and nothing can take its place (ch. 78).

Another metaphor equated with lowliness is that of the traditional female

role. Here, the Tao-te ching exhorts the reader to "know the masculine but keep forgiveness, heaven also dispenses justice to the wicked:

to the feminine" and "to know the white (yang) but keep to the black (yin)" (ch.

28). The sage and the ruler are urged to adopt yin qualities commonly associated

When people don't fear force,

with the female role. 24 The power of weakness is also shown in the image of the

Greater force is on the way.

(Ch.72)

infant, whose helplessness can dominate the whole family. Here, the Baha'i scriptures remind us that through meekness, a human being is elevated to the

Vast is heaven's net and wide-meshed

heaven of power while "pride degrades him to the lowest station of humiliation

Yet nothing slips through.

and debasement" (Baha'u 'Ilah, BaM' [World Faith 180):

(Ch.73)

25. We may note that the last four lines of this quotation also portray the idea of

24. The Tao-te ching can be said to be the first classic to raise the very delicate bearing the guilt of the people on one's own shoulders. This "scapegoat" idea is

question about reaching the goal of sexual equality. When both men and women reminiscent of the sacrifice of the life of the prophet for the people who refuse to

remember yang but emphasize yin, they will obtain greater equality.

recognize the prophet.

26. This is different from Confucius's teaching, "Requite a grievance with

justice."

The Great Tao

31

Similarly, Baha'i prayers ask for God's forgiveness and mercy, and Baha'is

Reduce the self

are assured that although "justice and equity are twin Guardians that watch
over And curb desire.

men" (Baha'u'l'hili, Epistle 13) and that "all your doings hath My Pen graven
(Ch.29)

with open characters upon tablets of chrysolite" (Baha'u'l'hih, Gleanings 210),
God is at the same time "forgiving and compassionate toward the concourse of

BaM'u'IIah states, "How often have things been simple and easy of
the faithful" (The Bab, Selections 45).

accomplishment, and yet most men have been heedless, and busied
themselves

with that which wasteth their time!" (Epistle 137). Lao-tzu continues to stress
Contentment

the importance of moderation:

The scriptures of the major religions warn their believers of the variable
fortunes of the world and exhort them not to be attached to material wealth.

Therefore the sage is

Baha'u'llah warns, "Be content, O people, with that which God hath desired
Severe, but he doesn't cut;

for you and predestined unto you ..." (Gleanings 103). Christ said the same
Exact but he doesn't hurt;

thing, "For what is a man profited if he should gain the whole world and lose
Straight, but he doesn't strain;

his soul" (Matthew 16:26). The Tao-te ching contributes the following:
Bright, but he doesn't dazzle.

(Ch.58)

No calamity is greater

Than not knowing what is enough.

Moderation in thought and behavior should be the aspiration of all those who

No fault worse than wanting too much. flow with

Tao. 'Abdu'l-Baha was known to tread the spiritual path with practical

Whoever knows what is enough

feet. In the Kaiimat-i-Firdawsiiyih. BaM'u'IIah gave great importance to
Has enough.

moderation, "If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil"

(Tablets

(Ch.46)

69), and exhorted the rulers that moderation is a necessity, since freedom in

Attachment comes at wasteful cost; excess will

"exercise a pernicious influence upon men ..." (Gleanings 216).

Hoarding leads to a certain loss; Without

moderation, there will be the signs of the "anti-Tao," such as civil
Knowing what is enough avoids disgrace;
disturbances and war. "The countryside will be out of joint and man will hear
Knowing when to stop secures from peril. the cry of
loyalty and allegiance" (ch. 18). "Rulers will be taxing their people
Only thus can you long last. heavily"
(ch. 75). Indeed, the court will be resplendent while the fields are
(Ch.44) weedy and the granaries empty:
Moderation

The court is very resplendent;
There are two sides to human nature: the material and the spiritual. Although
Very weedy are the fields,
material pleasure-labeled "music and dainties" by Lao-tzu-is at once absorbing
and the granaries very empty.
and attention getting, we should not forget our spiritual nature or the Tao
within They wear gaudy dothes,
us, since it is only by a balance of humankind's material and spiritual natures
that Carry sharp swords,
one can be truly happy (ch. 35). Moderation is the key to successful living.
This Exceed in eating and drinking,
idea is supplemented by the theory that there is "cyclical reversion" in Tao's
Have riches more than they can use.
movement (ch. 48). Cyclical reversion refers to the idea that Tao, after
reaching Call them robber-braggarts;
the climax in its movement, will revert from one pole to the opposite pole.
The They are anti-Tao indeed!
lesson we should learn from this teaching is moderation or contentment. In
other (Ch.53)
words, one should not push any activity to the extreme limit, so as to avoid
the
reaction or setback that will inevitably occur when the limit is reached. Thus,
the This description covers people in any epoch (not only the early Chinese
epoch)

true sage eschews excesses, extremes, and extravagances:
who are autocratic, competitive, class conscious, deceitful, violent, or
oppressive.
Nevertheless, although the anti-Tao may thrive and the covetous and aggressive
Keep to simplicity ones
succeed for a short time, they are never rich and powerful enough, and the
Grasp the primal, very
causes of their temporary success must lead inevitably to their downfall:

The Great Tao 33
32 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES
4.2.1991

Squalls do not last the morning without
taking credit, and, because the sage takes no credit, credit cannot be

Nor downpours the day.

taken

from the sage (ch. 22). Lao-tzu warns:

(Ch.23)

Be not troubled in poverty nor confident in riches, for poverty is followed by riches,

Many words exhaust Truth

and riches are followed by poverty. (Baha'u'llah, Hidden Words 40)

Keep to the empty center!

(Ch.2)27

The themes of all major religions can be said to be love, peace, and non-
When prudence and wit appear

violence. While Baha'is today cherish the hope that "the weapons of war
Great hypocrites are here.

throughout the world may be converted into instruments of reconstruction and
(Ch. 18)

that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men" (Baha'u'llah, Tablets 23), in 600 Be, Lao-tzu echoed this feeling:

Sage or Prophet?

As to whether Lao-tzu was a sage or prophet, we must note that although his
Killing multitudes brings weeping and sorrow;

teachings were very similar to the prophets of the world religions, he was not
treat victory like a funeral.

one of them. Indeed, Lao-tzu never claimed or alluded to prophethood in his
(Ch.31)

writings. Shoghi Effendi confirms this:

Fish should not leave the depths;

Regarding Lao-Tse; the Baha'fs do not consider him a prophet, or even a
secondary

Neither should weapons of state ever be aired.

prophet or messenger, unlike Buddha or Zoroaster, both of whom were Divinely-
(Ch.36)

appointed and fully independent Manifestations of God. (From a letter on behalf
of

Shoghi Effendi, in Lights of Guidance 502).

Weapons may be necessary, but they should be used sparingly. In fact,
Taoism believes that wisdom is to ignore challenges and never to have

Similarly, Confucius was also not regarded as a prophet by Shoghi
Effendi:

aggressive attitudes toward nature or other people. According to Lao-tzu,

"Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is
the founder of a

humanity cannot achieve its aims by aggressive action. In fact, to yield is to
be moral system and a great reformer" (from a letter on behalf of

Shoghi Effendi, in

preserved whole, since the sage "does not compete with anyone, hence no one

Lights of Guidance 501). It is acknowledged, however, that

Confucius "became

beneath heaven can compete with him" (ch. 22).

the cause of civilization, advancement and prosperity for the people of China" ('Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets 469) and that the teachings of Confucius like those of Deeds, not Words

Buddha "bestow a fresh life upon mankind and constitute the immediate remedy

Both the BaM'i scriptures and the Tao-te ching stress the preference of deeds over for all the ills of social life" ('Abdu'l-Baha, Baha' (World Faith 348).

words. The famous Chinese saying "He who speaks does not know, and he who

Thus, in China, we have the unique case of a religion without a prophet 28 It

knows does not speak" resounds throughout the Tao-te ching (ch. 56).

is a religion without a revelation. With respect to Confucianism and Taoism

BaM'u'lillh warns that "the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a seen together, the former can be said to constitute the Yang. or positive aspect

deadly poison (Kitab-i-fqan 193) and that the most negligent of people is the one of life and culture, and the latter the Yin, or passive aspect, the two balancing

who "disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother"

and complementing each other. It is meaningful to view these two religions

(BaM'u'lillh, Hidden Words 23-24). In inimitable word-play, Lao-tzu continues:

holistically. They are two halves, inexorably linked in the cultural thought of

True words are not nice;

27. For Tao, the empty center is also the center of humankind's multiform

Nice words are not true,

personality, with its unfathomable ability to explore unconsciously whole fields of

A good man does not argue;

activity that the conscious mind overlooks and to let courses of action merge through

An arguer is not good.

rumination about facts rather than through conceptualization of them.

(Ch.81)

28. Of course, there

might have been a revelation in China before Lao-tzu. The

legends of the Yellow Emperor could also have been the hazy memory of a

The Tao-te ching argues that the sage manages without doing and teaches

manifestation. But these are mere speculations compared with the more substantial

without talking, rears children without owning them, accomplishes merit

evidence available regarding the teachings and lives of Lao-tzu and Confucius.

the Chinese people, originating in the same century. While Confucianism attuned to the spiritual waves in the atmosphere of the sixth century BC. How else

manifests its influence mainly in the ethical and political sphere, Taoism could one account for the enduring quality of the Tao-te ching for two and a half

manifests its influence in the literary, the artistic, and the spiritual.

millennia of Chinese history (that included two big book burnings and some sharp

There is a traditional belief that a meeting took place between Confucius and rivalries between Tao and Buddhism, especially during the T'ang and Yuan

Lao-tzu. 29 The earliest account begins with Confucius going to Chou to put Dynasties) and for its similarity in spirit to the world's scriptures?

questions to Lao-tzu concerning the rites, although in the actual account nothing Alternatively, there can be another theory. As custodian of the imperial

further is said about the rites. All that takes place is a lecture from Lao-tzu on the archives, Lao-tzu had access to ancient scriptures, the sources of which were lost

kind of behavior to be avoided. There are other versions: one version of Confucian in antiquity. A question to ask here is whether it is possible that in the prehistory

origin recounts Confucius receiving instruction in the rites, and the other of Taoist of China there was a Manifestation of God so ancient that his name is now

origin concerning the censure of Confucius by Lao-tzu. Lau recounts four unknown and who appeared on the Chinese horizon so long ago that the

instances of Confucius recalling what he learned about the rites from Lao-tzu, civilization of the ancient Chinese people was always considered "great" and

although there is no account of the actual meeting (Chinese Classics 148).

relatively more "advanced" than those outside its borders. It is possible that the

Confucius is reported to have said the following after the meeting with Lao-tzu: remnants of this Manifestation's teachings were preserved sparingly in some

I know a bird can fly, a fish can swim, and an animal can run. For that which runs a

ancient books and that it was Lao-tzu (like Confucius), a student of the divine,

net can be made; for that which swims a line can be made; for that which flies
a who discovered and reflected on the ideas and preserved them in a
little booklet

corded arrow can be made. But the dragon's ascent into heaven on the wind and
the whose words remained relevant until this day)! One remembers here
Shoghi

clouds is something which is beyond my knowledge. Today I have seen Lao Tzu who
 Effendi's comments on the scarcity of references to the Asiatic
prophets:

is perhaps like a dragon. (Quoted in Lau, Chinese Classics 8)

The only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic prophets is because
their

Whatever the version, one notes that it is Confucius who sought advice from
 names seem to be [lost] in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is
mentioned and

Lao-tzu and not vice versa. I for one believe that Confucius was at one time a
 Zoroaster in our scriptures-both non-Jewish prophets or
non-semitic prophets. We

are taught there always have been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any
student of and an apprentice to the older philosopher Lao-tzu, whose influence
record of their names. (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Lights of
on the conception of non-anthropomorphic and all-pervasive Tao, a laissez-faire
Guidance 503)

(we-wei) philosophy of government, the advocacy of harmony, humility, justice,
moderation, and the emphasis of deeds over words can be observed in the

 We know that there were Stone Age people who lived in China,
but since we
thinking of Confucius himself. 30

 have no records of what they wrote (writing not yet having been
invented), we

If the author of the Tao-te ching were not a prophet, how then do we explain
 can only guess what they may have thought or believed. The earliest
Chinese

the book's sublime wisdom and enduring spiritual insights? Indeed, the Tao-te
 writings were found during the era of the Shang kings around
1400 BC. It was

ching sparkles with such bright gems of wisdom couched in provocative
 an age of large buildings, beautiful bronze vessels, elaborately
woven silks, etc.

paradoxes that it has an irresistible tug on the heart of the reader. Although
brief Although there were books, they have since decayed, and we are
only left with

and pithy, its insights are profound and provocative. Lao-tzu was so near to
 short inscriptions on bone and stone. These remnants give us a
tantalizing

prophethood a popular legend recounts that after he left his homeland, he
traveled glimpse at their elaborate religious ceremonies and

considerable political
to India and was reincarnated as the Buddha! Perhaps it is not unreasonable at
this organization but are insufficient to tell us much beyond their
visual form. Is it
point to advance the argument that, being a man of superior spirituality, he
was possible that in their ancient history, a Manifestation of God
appeared, leading
able to tap the spiritual currents emanating at that time from the Buddha in
India. to a golden period in Chinese civilization-a period that
Lao-tzu and Confucius
Lao-tzu (like Confucius) can be said to be a religious teacher, sensitive and
have always referred to and looked back on with longing and
inspiration?32

29. The earliest historical work that contains an account of such a meeting is
the Shih

31. Scholars such as Paul Sih have found that both Lao-tzu and Confucius drew
Chi. In the Chuang Tzu, there is an account of a meeting and the censure of
Confucius

heavily from the Shu of the Book of Documents, although they did not quote
explicitly

by Lao-tzu. In the Li Chi (Record of Rites), a Confucianist work compiled in
the first

century Be, we have four instances of Confucius recalling what he learned about
the rites from this or other books (Chinese Humanism 53).

32. See, for example, the references to "the ancients" in the Tao-te ching (ch.
62 and

from Lao-tzu (Lau, Chinese Classics 147).

65). References to the ancients are also found throughout the four books of
Confucius

30. This influence is evident in the four books of Confucius (see Chan, A
(see Chan, A Sourcebook).

Sourcebook).

36 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES

4.2.1991 The Great Tao

37

Decline and Decay

Things overgrown fall into decay.

Taoism (Tao Chia), as it is practiced today, is hardly recognizable as a

.That is not-Tao,

derivative of the original philosophy of the Tao as propounded by Lao-tzu and

And what is not-Tao soon ends.

(Ch.55)

Chuang-tzu. The Tao-te ching inspired the genesis of religious Taoism (Tao
Chiao) by Chang Tao-ling towards the end of the second century AD. Although

To conclude, the Tao-te ching is important because it contains the essence of
religious Taoism has shaped many of the popular beliefs, customs, and

festivals,
sacred literature. It is a book on how to remain whole during times of
confusion
it is associated today not so much with its original source as with all sorts
of
and on how to meet Tao. The Tao-te ching does not harp on or stress the central
mysteries, superstitions, gods, idols, miracles, and magic. The religious
Taoists
necessity of a belief in God because there was no such necessity when the book
formed a "church," and, through the centuries, generated a massive literature
complete with ritualistic and alchemical lore. They became embroiled in
politics was written. It was part of the common sense belief of
that time that Tao existed.
and sponsored violent revolutionary groups. Religious Taoism also developed
However, the people had forgotten how to live harmoniously with
Tao, having
regimes of meditation that are coupled with a complicated roster of gods
attributed erroneous aspects to it Thus, the main task of the
Tao-te ching was to
presiding over particular organs and functions. 33
dwell on the practical and the factual. It is, therefore, not a
mystical book in the
It is perhaps with regard to this development that 'Abdu'l-Baha refers to the
sense of seeking absorption in the All, or quietist in the sense of
withdrawing
"despondent hearts of the Chinese" and their "depressed souls"³⁴ and referred
from the here and now. The Tao-te ching is immensely social in
terms of laying
to the fact that the beliefs and rites of the Chinese religion have not
continued in down the wisdom of happy living through the practice of
humility, contentment,
accordance with their fundamental teachings ('Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered
moderation, and good deeds. Lao-tzu provides a model for a good
ruler and
Questions 165). Much that has survived of Taoism (or, for that matter,
lessons on what succeeds and what brings grief. The Tao-te
ching is dedicated to
Confucianism) today may be appropriately labelled as "a body without a soul"
the well-being of both the rulers and the ruled. Lao-tzu avoids
subjectivity and
(‘Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions 166).
turns his back on the superstition that Taoism later embraced.
In view of the association of later Taoism with magic, foretelling, and the
As a spiritual legacy, the Tao-te ching covers a vast variety of
subjects
occult in general, it is well to emphasize that the Taoism of Lao-tzu is no
less ranging from personal culture to political ideals, and

expounds on both the
iconoclastic than other prophetic faiths. The I Ching, a work now popular
immanent and the transcendent aspect of Tao. It has played a
major part in
among Westerners, reflects a mixture of wisdom and divination that
fostering a spirit of contentment, a deep love of nature, and a
strong sense of
characterized the Chou Dynasty during which Lao-tzu lived. However, its
humility, moderation, simplicity, and innocence in the psyche
of the Chinese
conventionality and superstition are not Tao but, rather, what Tao is against.
people. Could it be these very characteristics of the Chinese
people that inspired

The notion that nature can be magically manipulated to further personal
'Abdu'I-BaM to say these remarkable words?

interests is foreign to the Tao-te ching:

The Chinese people are most simple-hearted and truth-seeking. The Bahai teacher
of

As to foreknowledge,

the Chinese people must first be imbued with their spirit, know their sacred
literature,

It is a blossomy path

study their national customs and speak to them from their own standpoint and
their

And the beginning of folly.

own terminologies.... Truly, I say, the Chinese are free from any deceit and
(Ch.38) hypocrisies and are

prompted with ideal motives. 35

Religions may continue to rise and fall as they have done in the past.

And these words from Shoghi Effendi:

Similarly, Taoism has had its spring, summer, and autumn, and is obviously
now in its late winter. After more than 2,500 years, it has lost its uncarved,

... China-a land which has its own world and civilization,

whose people constitute

pristine nature and has become encrusted with layers of thoughts and practices

one-fourth of the population of the globe, which ranks

foremost among all nations in

not its own. This degeneration has not gone unpredicted:

material, cultural and spiritual resources and

potentialities. and whose future is

assuredly bright? (Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the Baha'is of the East, 23

January

33. Not surprisingly, religious Taoism has contributed to the rather popular
opinion that 1923, in "Compilation on China")

there are perhaps more superstitions in China than in other civilized countries
in the world.

34. From a tablet to an individual believer; translated by Shoghi Effendi, 18 July 1919 in "A Compilation on China."
35. Star of the West 13.7: 185. The original text of the words spoken by 'Abdu'l-

Baha has not yet been found to make verification of this translation possible.

The Great Tao 39
38 THE JOURNAL OF BAHAI STUDIES
4.2.1991

Lights of Guidance. Compo Helen Hornby. 2d ed. New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Works Cited Trust, 1988.

Maurer, Herryrnon, trans. Tao: The Way of the Ways. England: Wildwood House, 1986.

'Abdu'l-Baha. Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-BaM. Compo Research Dept. Needham, J. Science and Civilization in China. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge Baha'i World Centre. Trans. Marzieh Gail et al. Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978.

---. Some Answered Questions. Compo and trans. Laura Clifford Barney. 4th ed. University Press, 1956.

Scharlemann, R. P., ed. Paul Tillich: Writings on Religion. Berlin: De Gruyter-Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981. Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1988.

---. Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas. Vol. 2. New York: Baha'i Publishing Sill, Paul K. T., ed. Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality: Essays of John C. H. Committee, 1940.

Wu. New York: St John's University Press, 1965.

Bab, The. Selections from the Writings of the Bab. Compo Research Department. Trans.

Star of the West. "The Bahai Cause and the Chinese People" 13.7 (November, 1922):

H. Taherzadeh et al. Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1976. 184-86. Reprinted 1978 by George Ronald. Vol. 7.

Bahi'u'llah. Epistle to the Son of the Wolf Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 3d ed. Wilmette, IL:

Teillard de Chardin, Pierre. The Divine Milieu. London: Harper and Row, 1960. Bahn Publishing Trust, 1988.

Waley, Arthur, trans. The Way and Its Power. London: Allen and Unwin, 1935.

---. Gleanings from the Writings of BaM' u'ZZah. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed.

Watson, B., trans. Ssu-Ma Ch'ien: Records of the Grand Historian of China. New York:

Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976.

---. The Hidden Words of Baha'u'ZZah. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Columbia University Press, 1958.

Wei, H. The Guiding Light of Lao Tzu. Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House,

1982.

Publishing Trust, 1939.

Whitehead, A N. Religion in the Making. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926.

- - - . Kitab-i-Iqan [The Book of Certitude]. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette,

Wu, John C. H. Lao Tzu / Tao Teh Ching. New York: SL John's University Press, n.d.

IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1950.

_____. "Taoism." In Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality: Essays of John C.

- - - . Prayers and Meditations by BaM' u'ZZah. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. H. Wu. Ed. Paul Sih. New York: St John's University Press, 1965.

Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1969.

Yong, Choon Kim. Oriental Thought: An Introduction to the Philosophical and - - - . Tablets of BaM' u'ZZah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas. Compo Research Religious Thought of Asia. Toronto: Rowman and Allanheld, 1973.

Department. Trans. H. Taherzadeh et al. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978.

Baha'u'llih and 'Abdu'l-Baha. BaM'[World Faith. Rev. ed. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1956.

Berling, J. A The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Bible, The. Rev. ed. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952.

Chan, Wing-tsit. "The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism." In Religious Pluralism and World Community. Ed. Edward J. Jurji. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968.

- - - . A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Chili, Andrew. Chinese Humanism: A Religion beyond Religion. Taiwan: Fu Jen Catholic University Press, 1981.

Chiu, Milton M. The Tao of Chinese Religion. Boston: University Press of America, 1984.

"Compilation on China, A" Research Department. Baha'i World Centre, Haifa, January, 1986 (mimeograph).

Confucius. Doctrine of the Mean. In W. Chan, A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Desire of the World, The. Compo RUI)iyiyih Rabbanf. Oxford: George Ronald, 1982.

Divine Art of Living, The. Ed. Mabel Hyde Paine. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1960.

Giles, H. A., trans. Chuang Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961.

Huxley, J. Religion without Revelation. Rev. ed. London: M. Parrish, 1959.

Lau, D. C. Chinese Classics: The Tao Te Ching. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1980.

— The Great Tao (Used by permission of the curator)