6. TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

Chapter Overview

At this point, putting the subject matter of Chapter 6 into a partial, brief, geographical and chronological perspective might be helpful for students. Something along these lines could be used to give a glimpse of Eastern religions and where they developed.

INDIA: birthplace of
Hinduism
Jainism
Buddhism

6th Century B.C.E.: Jainism and Buddhism both emerge

CHINA: birthplace of
Taoism
Confucianism

JAPAN: birthplace of
Shinto religion. It developed during the period when Taoism and Confucianism were appearing

It would also be helpful if students studied the time line at the back of the book so they can visualize the development of these religions from yet another vantage point.

The goals of Chapter 6 are these:
1. To present the defining characteristics of Taoism and Confucianism
2. To highlight the distinct differences between these two religions
3. To describe the foundations of Taoism and Confucianism

Taoism and Confucianism are two very different religious traditions of ancient China. As religious and social forces, they have coexisted for centuries in China and have spread to other Asian regions like Japan and Hong Kong. Although both religions are grounded in Eastern culture, their respective approaches to religious questions, such as the meaning of existence and the most productive way to approach life's problems, are extraordinarily different. Even so, they co-exist and offer complementary values of such a nature that one person's actions and thoughts can encompass both sets of traditions.

It is worth noting that both Taoism and Confucianism take a turn toward more practical matters than the Hindu systems may appear to invite. Students may enjoy this break from India's philosophically penetrating reflections on the reasons for suffering and the way to end desire. Here in Chapter 6, Chinese traditions ask questions that may be closer to home for many people: How can we achieve longevity? How can I learn to get along better with my family? What values should I support in order to be a good government official? These questions are typically Chinese, and like so many other matters Chinese, they emphasize the importance of harmony, social relationships, and getting practical results from one's efforts.
Defining Taoism

TAOISM is difficult to clearly define. In fact, the word Taoism is a scholarly label which awkwardly covers both philosophical and religious traditions. A very useful distinction in introducing these Chinese traditions is to differentiate Taoism the philosophy and Taoism the religion. Taoism as philosophy emanates from the ancient indigenous spiritual ways that permeate the East.

It is based on the ancient Chinese understanding of the universe, in which there is a self-generating force called CHI (rather than there being a Creator Deity). This force manifests two interplaying aspects: YIN and YANG. Yin is the dark, receptive, female aspect of the universe; Yang is the bright assertive, male quality. These two opposites are ever-present in nature, and are constantly shifting in balance. The rhythm that the two elements create through their interplay is called the Tao or way.

Philosophically, for Taoism, the ideal life is one that is lived in harmony with the way of this shifting nature. Historically, the origin of Taoist philosophy is unclear, but it is said to have started with the Yellow Emperor allegedly c.a. 2697-2597 B.C.E. He is thought to have studied with an ancient sage who taught him about meditation, health, and military classics. The scriptural basis for Taoism is found in the Tao-te Ching which means, The Classic of the Way and the Power. This brief text is replete with beautiful images of nature, cosmic mystery and thoughts about the eternal. It offers students meaningful aphoristic passages that have many possible interpretations. The number of translations of these scriptures is second only to those of the Christian Bible. Chinese tradition states that, the Tao-te Ching was written by Lao-tzu (which means Old Boy), a very aged sage. The central theme of the Tao-te Ching is that one can live most happily by harmonizing one s self with the universe and with the challenges of life in general by being receptive to the beauty and direction of nature, and by being quiet as well.

The Tao in Taoist philosophy is extremely difficult to express. It is the eternally real, unnamable. It stands for that which is eternally real. It is the mystical reality that cannot be completely grasped by the mind. According to the Tao-te Ching it cannot be named or categorized, but it exists. Perhaps a fitting description would be to call it ineffable--something real, experiential, but beyond adequate articulation. For example, a woman who has gone through labor and birth knows that it all was real; however, if she attempts to describe what the experience felt like to a man, the ineffable quality of the labor and birth would soon surface. Although knowing the Tao fully is impossible and analyzing it pointless, setting one s actions in harmony with its course is critical to a peaceful life, according to this philosophy. To do so, one is enjoined to experience the transcendent unity of all that is. The Tao symbolizes the power to unify opposites at a higher level. All differences and opposites have their unity in the paradox of the Tao.

A second major principle of the life in harmony with Tao is that of WU WEI, which means action through non-action. The principle teaches that unnecessary action is usually not productive. Instead, it urges aligning one s inner self in harmony with the Tao, so that energy and activity will flow spontaneously and naturally. Examples of the wu wei is the act of composing a paragraph. If the writer becomes too excited and tense and tries to force herself to write a certain number of words on a difficult topic, then the writing produced is not likely to be very sound. However, if the writer is able to remain calm and relaxed and tackles a subject that she enjoys, the words that are written are much more likely to be good. Ultimately, says Taoism, the second approach is a more efficient use of our mental and our physical energies. Taoism frequently uses the image of flowing water to illustrate the ideal life. Another example is that of water passing over rocks flows smoothly and effortlessly, yet it is powerful enough to carve great canons by this persistent movement. A third example is that of a butcher who lets his hand be guided by the natural makeup of the carcass, finding the spaces between the bones where a slight movement of the blade will glide through without resistance.
A third major principle, according to Taoist philosophy regarding the ideal lifestyle, is to retire from the hectic pace of government or business life and seek out contemplation to find the still center. The ideal life conserves energy and saves it for those special times when action is really needed. As with Buddhism, Taoism recommends the contemplative life and moderation over excesses. As Lao-tzu said, Sweet music and highly seasoned food may entertain for a while, but the clear, tasteless water from the well gives life and energy without exhaustion.

Taoism offers suggestions, too, for methods to reign the physical tendencies of the human body and to direct it toward longevity. Part of the mystical folklore of Taoist philosophy includes techniques for achieving immortality through secret teachings or spiritual alchemy. The latter is said to transmute the body into a vehicle for the eternal. Taoism teaches that to live without illness and pain is important and is achieved by leading a quiet and thoughtful life, practicing sexual abstinence, eating well, especially certain herbs, and practicing the martial art of T'ai-chi chuan.

This art lies somewhere between a martial form and a dance. Although it appears slow and graceful, it contains moves in it that were once secret means of self-defense. In T'ai-chi chuan, the Taoist feminine principle of receptivity and yielding is stressed. It emphasizes the use of the body to move in harmony with the yin and yang forces of nature, consummating in the achievement of equilibrium.

Taoism: the religion

As a religion Taoism is a combination consisting of Confucian virtues, Buddhist-like rituals, as well as Taoist bases in meditation and the natural way of life. A number of religious sects called collectively Hsien (or Immortals) are found in Taoism. Though diverse, they all are characterized by polytheism, ancestor worship, and the practice of worship through the use of priests. Taoist religion, estimated to have begun in the first century C.E., is slightly younger than Taoism the philosophy. Some of the colorful beliefs and practices of Mahayana Buddhism, which was developing in nearby regions, were incorporated into Taoist religion. As religion, Taoism is more specific and defined than Taoist philosophy. As religion, the tradition venerates ancestors, especially Lao-tzu who is said to have ascended into the heavens. In Taoist religion, nature is worshiped. Gods rule streams, rivers, mountains, animals, plants, and stars. In short, gods rule all that is.

During the twentieth century, the Communist government challenged such belief in gods. Whenever China's government under communism has required allegiance to itself, and to persecute and repress rival authorities. During the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, Taoist sacred books and temples, along with those of the Buddhists and Confucians, were destroyed in the name of political power. More recently, there has been a resurgence in freedom of religion in China, although it is not certain what the future holds for beliefs and practices involving ancient Taoist traditions.

Confucianism

As intuitive and receptive as Taoism is, it finds its counterpart in Confucianism, which is a more outwardly directed, pragmatic approach to life. Confucianism originated about the same time as Taoism, during the sixth century B.C.E., an era of great spiritual teaching throughout India, Greece, and China. For example, this was approximately the era of the Buddha, maybe Lao-tzu, Persia's empire, Athens's Golden Age, the great prophets of Judaism.

Confucius' name was Kung Fu-tzu (Master Kung). His teachings were called Juchiao, the teaching of the scholars. The name Confucius is an Anglicization of the Latin translation of his name. For the sake of familiarity, we will use the name Confucius, keeping mind that it is not the historical name for the man who founded this tradition.
Confucius was born into a genteel family that had fallen upon hard times due to a change in the ruling dynasty. Financial responsibilities required that Confucius, whose father died when he was three years old, take a job in public service. He is believed to have married and had two children. Confucius, then, was a bureaucrat, who by inclination and personal study found his way into teaching values to the upcoming generation. Unlike many religious founders, he was not a full time sage. He had to earn a living, and he did this by holding various jobs for the government. He instructed students in the Six Classics of China’s cultural heritage which are, the I Ching, poetry, history, rituals, music, and dance. Today, only five of the six survive—the one on music has either been destroyed or perhaps never existed. His teaching was considered fairly unimportant during his lifetime, and it was only in subsequent centuries that his contributions were widely recognized.

Confucianism teaches that the life of the gentleman-scholar is the highest calling. The informed, educated, public servant is viewed as a person who can distribute human kindness among society. Jen, which means innate goodness, benevolence, human-heartedness, which is the most important virtue extolled by Confucianism. It is the quality in a human being that permits a person to perform the Golden Rule of not doing to others what you would not want them to do to you. It is not commonly known that Confucius coined the term Golden for this rule which is frequently associated with Judaism and Christianity.

Social hierarchy is extremely important in Confucianism. It is every person’s responsibility to know her or his place in family and in society and to keep relationships positive in that social order. Respect for one’s elders is stressed and carried further with the custom of ancestor worship, called li. It is important to emphasize that Confucius said very little about the supernatural, focusing instead on the here-and-now.
Confucianism came to be adopted by the state during the Han dynasty (205 B.C.E.-220 C.E.). China's educational system, which lasted until this century, was based on a study of six classics. As previously mentioned these include, the I Ching, poetry, history, rituals, music, and dance. Confucianism teaching on the importance of the scholarly life was strongly attacked by Mao Zaedong during the Cultural Revolution.

Confucianism survives today although Confucius' teachings are no longer used for schoolchildren. It survives in Japan as a code of ethics. Confucianism's ideals advocating education, order, duty, and public servitude constitute an important part of the Japanese mindset and may have accounted for some of the tremendous successes Japan has had after World War II. The dedication to right relationships and a solid social order contrast directly with the inner direct intuition of Taoism, but both offer practical rules for guiding behavior even for the modern world.

**Key Terms**

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