

## PERSON AND CULTURE IN THE TAOIST TRADITION

*Russell Kirkland*

Specialists in the study of Chinese religion have spilled much ink over the issue of what "Taoism" is. To some, it is simply a convenient rubric for discussing common concepts in Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, and related literature. In H. G. Creel's more restrictive usage, "true Taoism" is represented only by those "pure" elements of speculative philosophy found in Chuang-tzu alone.<sup>i</sup> To some more recent scholars, such as Michel Strickmann, the term "Taoism" properly refers to the socially definable religious tradition that had common roots in the second-century movement established by Chang Tao-ling.<sup>ii</sup> In the last decade or two, as an increasing number of Western scholars have devoted themselves to Taoist research, several have also turned their attention to the definitional question of what, precisely, "Taoism" is.<sup>iii</sup> I shall forego the temptation to catalogue the results here, but what seems to emerge from the deliberations of many specialists is a general consensus that "Taoism" is (or at least once was) a single, if highly diverse, cultural system.

What, then, are we to make of the time-honored chestnut that there were actually two "Taoisms" -- the ancient philosophical school represented by Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, and a later religious tradition, which may or may not have had much in common with the former? Virtually every student of Chinese thought or religion has been acquainted with the notion that that distinction of tao-chia from tao-chiao is one that "the Chinese make themselves." In the formulation of Fung Yu-lan, for instance:

there is a distinction between Taoism as a philosophy...and the Taoist religion....Their teachings are not only different; they are even contradictory.

Taoism as a philosophy teaches the doctrine of following nature, while Taoism as a religion teaches the doctrine of working against nature.<sup>iv</sup>

Such ideas -- like those of H. G. Creel -- have been echoed widely in Western scholarship, irrespective of their inherent validity. This is not the place for a comprehensive critique of such a position. I shall merely suggest that, in terms of our present knowledge of the Taoist tradition, it seems unlikely that either Fung or Creel have much, if anything, to contribute, for the simple reason that neither seems ever to have given any serious attention to post-classical Taoism. Neither, for instance, gives much evidence of ever having browsed through the contents of the Tao-tsang. Creel even bases his statements about "hsien Taoism" almost exclusively upon the quite peripheral figure of Ko Hung -- the Confucian would-be alchemist who wrote the early fourth-century set of essays known collectively as the Pao-p'u-tzu.<sup>v</sup>

Professor Laurence Thompson, who has addressed many issues in the study of Chinese religion over the years, recently weighed in with some of his own reflections on scholars' attempt to define "Taoism."<sup>vi</sup> The present essay is intended as a contribution to the continuing effort of scholars like Professor Thompson to help refine our analytical and interpretive frameworks for the study of Chinese religion. I certainly do not pretend to have resolved all the pertinent interpretive problems; indeed, I shall not even attempt to mention them all. Rather, my goal here is to enrich the debate over what Taoism is by posing some provocative questions, and offering some provocative thoughts. More specifically, I wish to examine some of the cultural assumptions that seem to underlie the insistence of many modern minds upon maintaining a categorical distinction between "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism." In this effort, I shall draw attention to certain unexamined cultural and intellectual values that seem to prevail among intellectuals of modern China and the West alike. Our ability to understand other cultures accurately (or even, perhaps, our own) may well be tied to our ability to recognize such prejudices -- our own patterns of making sense of things and determining their value on the basis of axiomatic (i.e., unexamined) assumptions about what is true, valid, or even worthy of our

attention. Such values, I propose, need to be examined in light of specific historical realities within each culture. I do not contend that such "biases" are *inherently* in conflict with reality, but merely that we need to be fully aware of our own values, and alert to the possibility that the intellectual and religious values at work within our own culture (whether Chinese or Western) might at times color or even distort our efforts to make sense of a cultural tradition like Taoism. Similar questions can of course be raised in relation to Japanese understandings of Taoism, some of which have recently been surveyed by Professor Thompson.<sup>vii</sup> But at present I shall restrict my discussion to the Sino-Western academic milieu, within which Taoism is studied and taught in much of the world.

What I wish to propose is that the common distinction of "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" ultimately reflects specific cultural prejudices current among intellectuals in late imperial China and the modern West. Naturally, it is not possible to detail here the pertinent intellectual history in each culture completely. For the moment, I shall merely suggest that there are quite clear cultural explanations for attitudes such as those of H. G. Creel and Fung Yu-lan. What they, and many other modern interpreters, seem to project is a sort of generic "protestant" attitude, an attitude that generally abhors ritual and virtually every form of social religious activity, and esteems instead an individualistic striving for a more abstract spiritual exaltation. The position of modern Chinese intellectuals like Fung Yu-lan, I suggest, reflects specific fears and concerns of their Confucian forebears in late imperial China (a point to which I shall return below). Meanwhile, Western interpreters like Creel are heir to a post-Reformation sensibility that identifies the locus of virtually all legitimate values -- moral, social, or religious -- within the isolated individual.

### **Cult or Cultivation?**

Some of the recent scholarship of Gregory Schopen has demonstrated rather convincingly that 19th- and 20th-century Western scholarship on Indian Buddhism has often been marked by

assumptions that reflect the dominant Protestant values of the modern West.<sup>viii</sup> The pertinence of such considerations to the study of Chinese thought and religion seems to be brought home by a book published a few years ago by Rodney Taylor. That work, entitled *The Way of Heaven: An Introduction to the Confucian Religious Life*, was issued within a series entitled *The Iconography of Religions*.<sup>ix</sup> Each volume of that series featured illustrations of actual religious practice in different traditions, with a brief introductory text outlining the nature of the tradition in question. Taylor's introduction reiterates his fundamental thesis that Confucianism should be considered a "religion" on the grounds that its ultimate goal is the attainment of sagehood. I shall not pass judgment upon that thesis here. Rather, I would like to stress is that it seems ironic that the photographs that Taylor presents to illustrate Confucian religious life seem to have little to do with the individual search for "sagehood": they are devoted almost exclusively to illustrating rituals being performed by priests in Confucian temples. Such a contrast strikes home very deeply for a student of Taoism. It would seem that the same question holds for Confucianism and for Taoism alike: To what extent is the tradition devoted to individual cultivation -- to the search for "sagehood" -- and to what extent is the tradition a "religion" in a sense closer to that which scholars like Melford Spiro or Clifford Geertz have suggested -- a cultural system of rituals and symbols designed to allow interaction with real or purported beings who pertain to a higher order of existence?<sup>x</sup>

A generation of students have learned Chinese religion from Professor Thompson's text, *The Chinese Way in Religion*.<sup>xi</sup> Those students have all read the "Sacrificial Hymn to Confucius," in some versions of which, at least, Confucius is apparently represented as a divinity who is not only co-equal with Heaven and Earth, but also the "ruler of living beings and things."<sup>xii</sup> Now, it is well known that "Lao-tzu" (though likely an invented figure himself) became the subject of imperial sacrifices in Han times as well. Yet, those in Chinese history who have understood "Lao-tzu" as a divinity have, in modern times, been identified as representatives of "the tao-chiao," which, Fung and Creel insist, must be sharply distinguished from "the tao-chia." Yet, no one, to my knowledge, has insisted upon an analogous bifurcation

within Confucianism. Would it not seem appropriate to attempt to interpret both traditions within more or less the same terms, seeking shared patterns that might reveal common and enduring elements of Chinese religion and culture?

While the pursuit of such grand questions seems quite fruitful, I shall restrict my focus here to Taoism, and address myself to a single, if complex, question: To what extent is Taoism a matter of "cultivation" -- an individual pursuit of self-perfection (or "sagehood," if you will) -- and to what extent does it involve real or purported beings who pertain to a higher order of existence. Or, to put the matter in the simplest terms, what is the relationship of "cult" and "cultivation" in the Taoist tradition?

At first glance, it might seem that such an undertaking constitutes no more than an exercise in comparing and contrasting the so-called "philosophical" and "religious" forms of Taoism. But the more one becomes acquainted with the historical and textual realities of the Taoist tradition, the less tenable such a bifurcation seems to become. Let us, for present purposes, suggest that we delimit the Taoist tradition in terms of (1) the various texts preserved in the Tao-tsang and (2) those individuals and groups who composed, preserved, and used those texts. Such a delimitation (inspired, in part, by certain suggestions of Michel Strickmann) nonetheless leaves us with a fairly amorphous subject for study, for the Tao-tsang contains a plethora of material pertaining to both "cult" and "cultivation." One finds in the collection an abundance of materials pertaining to ritual and meditative communion with higher powers, as well as the full range of classical Taoist philosophical works and an extensive collection of pertinent commentaries. Furthermore, historical and biographical texts of, say, the T'ang dynasty onward demonstrate that the concepts and values first encountered in Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu remain quite central to the thought and speech of members of the later religious tradition.<sup>xiii</sup> Moreover, we find the central concern of individual self-perfection flourishing in later Taoism, both in the meditational systems of Six Dynasties Shang-ch'ing Taoism and of T'ang masters like Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen, as well as in the so-called "Inner Alchemy" of later times -- a system designed to facilitate psychological and spiritual transcendence along lines reminiscent of both

classical Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism (which was, of course, deeply indebted to Chuang-tzu in particular).<sup>xiv</sup> For present purposes, I propose to refer to those elements of the Taoist tradition as "mystical Taoism," a term that I borrow from the recent work of Livia Kohn. However, I employ this term here in a somewhat different sense than Kohn does: I shall use the term primarily in order to contrast all these elements with the more social, ritual, and sacerdotal traditions of Taoism, to which such scholars as Norman Girardot have sometimes referred, quite properly, as "liturgical Taoism." Before I return to the broader interpretive questions, I shall undertake the formidable task of identifying some of the fundamental continuities and discontinuities that seem to exist between those two types of Taoist practice.

### **"Mystical Taoism" and "Liturgical Taoism"**

When seeking the principal distinction between "liturgical Taoism" and "mystical Taoism," an immediate thought is that the former is essentially a social tradition, whereas the latter is essentially an individual matter. Indeed, there would seem to be more than a kernel of truth in such a notion. But I think that we should also beware oversimplification. "Liturgical Taoism" does pertain in real ways to the life of the individual, just as "mystical Taoism" does pertain to society as a whole. Yet, there are subtle differences, especially in terms of how each conceives of the problems that it is addressing. That is, perhaps the key differences between the two reside in their precise conceptions of the soteriological enterprise. In part, the difference seems to involve the degree to which a person is conceived as attaining the Taoist goal as someone identified in terms of a specific social, familial and cultural context. Liturgical Taoism seems to take such matters seriously when offering its soteriological schema. Mystical Taoism, on the other hand, seems to conceive of the individual as something of a more generalized existential monad -- a cog, perhaps, in the *cosmos*, but not in the *community*, except in a fairly sanitized sense. The Taoist mystic may be part of *society* (on a certain rarefied level, at least), but he is seldom presented as being in any meaningful way a part of his *local community*. When the

Taoist mystic pursues the goal of self-perfection, he may happen to be *in* a certain specific locale, but in his pursuit he is decidedly not *of* that locale. That is, his "true" identity is not seen as being in any real way *tied* to that community, or to his roles within it. Within liturgical Taoism, the opposite is true: the individual is often conceived as a member of a specific human community, a specific time and place with its real-life web of interrelationships. Liturgical Taoism generally accepts the reality and the value of the individual's localized, historicized existence, while mystical Taoism generally seems not to do so.

This having been said, it must of course be granted that what we are dealing with here is by no means a polar opposition, but rather a broad continuum. One could argue, for instance, that Chuang-tzu is further toward the "mystical" end of the spectrum than is Lao-tzu, since the Tao te ching accepts the need to address social, political, and even military issues that are seldom addressed in the Chuang-tzu (particularly in the earlier chapters). But part of the abiding appeal of Lao-tzu -- particularly in overseas markets, such as our own -- has always been its timelessness, its lack of "cultural baggage" -- a virtually complete absence of distracting references to any specifically localized realities. As recent North American experience has demonstrated, it seems to be as easy for a modern person to be a Lao- Chuang Taoist as it was for a person of antiquity, and nearly as easy for a Westerner as for a Chinese. The reason is that Lao-Chuang soteriology is generalized, cosmicized, and internalized. To moderns, such a soteriology is highly attractive, in part, at least, because it mirrors so much of the modern sentiment, particularly in religious terms: the Taoist mystic is *alone with the Tao* -- quite divorced from the "external" realities of his family and community -- just as the Protestant Christian is *alone with God*, in no need of priest or liturgy. Moderns -- Chinese and Westerners alike -- generally exult in the self-esteem generated by the romantic conceit that the individual is free from all external constraints, and can achieve for her- or himself whatever he or she chooses. Self-perfection for the Taoist mystic (as for the Confucian "Sage") is, in theory, completely within the grasp of the individual alone, with little need for the mediation of anyone else, neither other people nor spiritual beings. In seeking the religious goal, one is in no way restricted by

one's so-called "external" identity, nor by any of the real-life problems that afflict that real-life identity. In other words, I suggest that mystical Taoism has achieved the respect and affection of Westerners because it seems delightfully Protestant, whereas liturgical Taoism has frequently been dismissed and disparaged because, unconsciously, it has often seemed painfully reminiscent of Catholicism.<sup>XV</sup>

To return to the Taoist spectrum, one might suggest that along the "mystical" end the spectrum, the soteriological media are variously moral and meditative, employing models of individual cultivation or transformation. The soteriology of mystical Taoism usually involves a process that might be termed personal re-perspectivization -- a transformative process of self-discovery that involves a new mode of perceiving reality. Along the "liturgical" end of the spectrum, on the other hand, the soteriological media are primarily moral and ritual, and the models are variously developmental and restorative. A primary assumption that underlies the *entire* spectrum seems to be that one's proper involvement in the processes of the universe results in the person (and sometimes the society or community) achieving a restoration of proper perspective, and a balance and harmony that was previously missing. In addition, both "mystical" and "liturgical" Taoism work to focus the individual in to the deeper elements of reality underlying the domain of our everyday lives, and provide a rectification of our lives through a realignment with those deeper realities.

What the liturgical tradition offers is a much more active and interactive mode of effecting that realignment. In liturgical Taoism, a single individual sometimes plays a single role: for instance, the practitioner of early Ling-pao Taoism participated directly in the process of cosmic re-harmonization by reciting the sacred text of the **Tu-jen ching** ("The Scripture for Human Salvation"), which was conceived as being an emanation of the Tao itself. In so doing, the practitioner actually effected her or his own salvation, and helped restore the cosmic order by drawing upon the salvific power crystallized in that text. In later forms of liturgical Taoism, roles were often differentiated into a more active role (that of the officiant) and a more passive role (that of the other participants). Even there, however, both parties are involved in a process



of spiritual interaction, a participatory process that is at once person- transcendent and person-specific. That is, one participates in the spiritual process not only as an element of the cosmos as a whole, but also as a specific individual, whose identity within a specific local community is implicitly assumed and re-valORIZED. The ritual begins with one's localized, contextualized existence; carries one into and through a transcendent, sacred realm; and eventually returns one to one's everyday life in a new point, a point near where one began, but nonetheless distinct. Now, the time and space within which one lives are newly sacralized (or, at the least, their inherent sacrality is newly disclosed). At the same time, the individual is morally and spiritually renewed, and, when all goes well, he or she undergoes (or is at least prepared for undergoing) a spiritual transformation. At this point, the individual may pursue that transformative process more intensively, either through deepened participation in the liturgical tradition itself, or through involvement in some of the pursuits more typical of the "mystical" end of the spectrum.

### **Elitism and Self-Cultivation in the Liturgical Tradition**

The liturgical tradition has often been characterized as "popular Taoism," and has long been disparaged as a religion of the superstitious masses. It often seems to be assumed that it could hold no interest for someone who esteems the pursuit of self-perfection that is so prominent in classics of ancient Taoist philosophy. But such attitudes, I argue, reflect the biases of both the Confucian intelligentsia of late imperial China, and those of modern Westerners, whose views of religion are imbued not only with a bias against ritual and priesthood, but also perhaps with a bit of the Marxist contention that religion is "the opiate of the people." In terms of positions like that of H. G. Creel, liturgical Taoism seems often to be dismissed as a childish indulgence fit only for simple minds, as opposed, of course, to the grand sophistication of thinkers like Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Here, again, one must note that neither Creel nor Fung

Yu-lan seem ever to have perused any of the texts of Taoist religious thought of T'ang or Sung times and beyond. Such Ch'uan-chen masters as Li Tao-ch'un, or even Ch'ing writers like Liu I-ming, certainly demonstrate that thoughtful Taoist ruminations upon the human condition did not suddenly dry up after Lieh-tzu or the so-called "Neo- Taoists" of the Three Kingdoms period (who, like Ko Hung, were actually fairly Confucian in orientation). But what must be recognized is that the forms that Taoism took in later imperial China underwent a vast historic shift for specific historical reasons. It is to that historical shift within the evolution of Taoism that I now turn.

The tradition of liturgical Taoism was, from its origins in the Six Dynasties, by no stretch of the imagination a development that occurred among the masses. It is true that the movement of the Celestial Masters in Han times sought and received support on the local level, but that was only because the emperors of the Later Han had, from the Taoist perspective, abrogated their responsibility to unite and harmonize Heaven, Earth and Humanity. Bereft of imperial patronage, the Celestial Masters had taken matters into their own hands, and had sought the participation of people of all levels of society. Be that as it may, the Celestial Master organization died out during the Six Dynasties. It was only after the revolutionary Shang- ch'ing and Ling-pao revelations of the fourth century that the liturgical practices evolved that became the backbone of all later Taoist liturgy. The formulator of those practices was the fifth-century reformer Lu Hsiu-ching, and his formulation of the primary Taoist liturgy was revived in the sixth century by T'ao Hung-ching. Both of those men were members of the social elite in south China, and both were honored by the rulers of their day. The Taoist tradition of the subsequent T'ang dynasty retained that elite cast, while preserving the universalistic ideal of the Ling-pao liturgy. Hence, the institutions of liturgical Taoism in its heyday were anything but "popular": they were highly elitist, in more sense than one. Not only were the leaders of the tradition highly educated, well-to-do, and politically well-connected.<sup>xvi</sup> But in addition, full participation in the tradition was the *exclusive* province of individuals who had *proven themselves worthy*. In the fourth century, participation had sometimes been restricted to

members of a certain prominent clan, or to a tiny circle of people who had received the formal transmission of a certain Taoist text. From the fifth century onward, full participation in the inner realities of Taoism was generally predicated upon the moral and spiritual worth of the individual. That is, religious practices were expected to be linked to one's level of personal achievement in spiritual self-cultivation.<sup>xvii</sup> In the present context, it seems sufficient to state that up to about the time of the Mongol conquest, Taoism maintained a primary concern with the individual's degree of success in a transformative spiritual process, a process of personal rediscovery that either assumed or resulted in an elevated mode of perceiving reality. That enduring Taoist emphasis profoundly affected the evolution of both Ch'an Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **The Marginalization of Liturgical Taoism**

Around the time that north China came under the control of the Jurchen and Mongols in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a major shift occurred in the socio-cultural status of Taoism. Under the conquest regimes, members of the Han Chinese elite were often under government suspicion and scrutiny, and their public activities were affected accordingly. The intelligentsia generally succumbed to real or perceived political pressure, and endeavored to "play it safe." Aspiring young men circumspectly developed careers along lines that seemed politically safe and economically secure. And, under these conditions, it was clearly more prudent to cultivate sagehood in private than it was to participate in a tradition that involved a public liturgy. The importance of this point for understanding Taoist history must not be underestimated. The Mongols and, later, the Manchus, were extremely wary of possible uprisings among their Chinese subjects, and kept a very close eye upon virtually all collective activities among those subjects. Even among the Chinese rulers of the Ming dynasty, social control was a fundamental

concern, for a very practical reason: one individual alone can pose little political threat, but people who gather to form groups *can* pose a threat. Hence, in late imperial China, any Chinese person with a healthy concern for personal safety (much less socio-economic advancement) would have seen the prudence of taking no part in religious activities that featured a highly visible social component. This was particularly true in regard to Taoism, which had always been loyal to the throne, but had also at times been exploited for political legitimation by rebels who arose to change the political mandate (sometimes successfully).<sup>xix</sup>

Hence, after the Mongol conquest, the Taoist liturgical tradition became increasingly marginalized, and fewer and fewer of the Chinese elite took part in the tradition, at least in leadership roles. Those who *did* step forward to participate as leaders of the liturgical tradition were increasingly men who already had limited prospects for political or economic advancement. Those who had realistic hopes for a career in government had little motivation to participate in liturgical activities. In Chinese history in general, the further one travelled down the road toward the goal of government service, the less one's life was grounded in the realities of one's natural family, community, or even one's native dialect: those studying in hopes of attaining public office were compelled, significantly, to endless hours of *individualized intellectual activity*, often under the tutelage of a mentor who represented both socio-political achievement and moral wisdom. It is thus hardly surprising that the religious aspirations in which such students took interest often involved a process of individualized self-development and a goal of personal transcendence. Here we see the context for the emergence of both Neo-Confucianism and the highly personalized Taoist movements of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Some of those Taoist movements (which Kubo Noritada aptly dubbed "the Taoist Reformation") rejected the social focus of the liturgical tradition in favor of a return to an ideal of individual purification, an ideal swathed in the rhetoric of classical Taoism but actualized in terms of the individualized meditative practices of Six Dynasties Shang-ch'ing Taoism and the more Buddhisticized practices of T'ang times. Here we find a "parting of the Way" *within* what has usually been called "religious Taoism": *from the conquest period onward, and only from that period, the*

*"mystical" tradition of Taoism began to become distanced from the liturgical tradition*, which had long been the pride of the religion. From that period on, those who were religiously inclined began to fall increasingly into two camps: (1) a cultural elite who practiced an individualized, "mystical" pursuit of self-perfection, and (2) a far less elite component, composed of people who cherished Taoist spiritual ideals but faced the very practical necessity of making a living. The second group became the main participants in the *modern* liturgical tradition in Taoism. To these people, the religious life became -- by necessity -- a profession, and their activities became -- by necessity -- a public service, a service performed, as always, for the benefit of all, but now underwritten by members of the local community.

It is at this point, also, that we can see the origins of the modern prejudice against liturgical Taoism, a prejudice that clearly never existed in earlier times. Careful analysis of Chinese historical and biographical materials reveals that down through the Sung period, the literati elite -- from politicians to poets -- were frequently well-acquainted with Taoist matters that many today would tend to consider quite "sectarian."<sup>xx</sup> In addition, the leaders of the Taoist liturgical tradition enjoyed the trust and the respect of both the Chinese government and the scholar-officials who made it run.<sup>xxi</sup> But the new socio-political conditions of the Chin, Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing periods discouraged ambitious men with promising futures from undertaking a sacerdotal career. And the more marginalized Taoism became in political, social, and economic terms, the more marginalized it became in terms of mainstream socio-cultural ideology. In other words, from Sung times on, Taoism became branded as "politically incorrect." Those who wished to lead a respected life in the public sphere began not only to eschew Taoism, but frequently felt compelled to denigrate it as well. The Neo-Confucians of late Sung times are well-known for their mania for "orthodoxy": thinkers competed to see who could be more "Confucian" than whom, and branded each other as heretics (and even, sometimes, as "closet Buddhists"). Many intellectuals in that period felt a need to justify themselves ideologically, and to protect themselves politically, by professing their own ideological probity. An ignoble but highly effective method of achieving those ends is to cast aspersions upon others: if we can

paint some other party in unflattering colors, and succeed in having such a caricature accepted by society at large, their stock falls and our stock rises. After Sung times, leaders of the Taoist liturgical tradition came to be re-defined as outcasts from the Chinese mainstream, and were ultimately denigrated as "charlatans" who deceived the gullible with a hodgepodge of meaningless superstitions. With each passing generation, the leaders of Chinese society became ever more distanced from the healthier (and more truly ecumenical) society of T'ang times, and ever more alienated from the liturgical dimensions of the Taoist. Each generation arose in ever greater ignorance of liturgical Taoism and its prominent place in earlier Chinese government, society, and culture. Each generation of the Chinese elite became more antagonistic to Taoism as a social reality, and found an ideological exemption only for certain carefully sanitized remnants of the Taoist heritage. Such righteous remnants included most notably the ancient philosophical classics, and, for some intellectuals, certain traditions of individualized self-cultivation. In other words, the only elements of Taoism that survived the ideological purge of late imperial China were those elements that smelled safe and comfortable to Confucians -- *classics passed down to us from ancient sages, vouchsafing to the enlightened reader the pure and noble path to his own eventual, individualized sagehood.*

### **The West's Re-Creation of "Taoism"**

Such was the cultural reality encountered by the first Western observers to have the opportunity to set up shop in China -- the Christian missionaries. It is very significant, however, that the Jesuit enterprise had been aborted by Rome, so that it was actually the Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century who endeavored to serve as midwife at the birth of a new, "enlightened" China. In the minds of these Westerners, and their descendants in the early twentieth century, the "new" China now being born would have the body of its Chinese mother but the mind and spirit of its Western father. That is, the newly purified China would implicitly preserve those elements of Chinese culture that fit neatly with the Westerners' ideals. And those

ideals, conceived in Greek rationalism, had, during the Reformation and Enlightenment, been purified of the "superstitious" dross of Catholic religiosity that had allegedly mired civilization during the "Dark Ages." Thus, what passed muster as respectable religion consisted, once again, of a sanitized version of traditional religion, in which *the ancient sacred text vouchsafed to the enlightened reader the pure and noble path to his own eventual individualized salvation*. And, as modern Chinese and Western intellectuals worked to write the history of Chinese culture and catalogue its contributions to civilization, their picture of Taoism emerged along predictably similar lines. Liturgical Taoism was not only decried as superstition unworthy of a respectable intellectual, but was furthermore charged with having audaciously committed a despicable theft and fraud: the ritualistic priests with all their silly mumbo-jumbo had audaciously stolen the name of "Taoism" from the sainted ancient philosophers Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. (Echoes of timeworn Protestant charges against Catholicism are once again unmistakable here.) Creel insisted that it was, after all, Chuang-tzu alone who presented the original, pure, and noble ideals of Taoism. But it must be noted that those ideals were generally interpreted as presenting a rarefied individual pursuit of spiritual self-perfection, which devalorizes, and in fact defines away, the boring and wart-covered realities of one's everyday life as a member of one's own actual family and local community. This rarefied "Taoist" vision common to many modern interpreters is able to provide the individual with a blissful sense of pride and satisfaction, on several important counts:

- (1) one is neither stained nor trapped by the frustrations and inadequacies of one's present life as So-and-so in such-and-such place;
- (2) the negative and unpleasant aspects of that life can legitimately be ignored, for they do not represent true reality;
- (3) true reality is transcendent, and is only accessible by direct experience; and yet, any really subtle person (such as, of course, oneself) can manage to attain such an experience with no special training, and no outside assistance;

(4) a person who follows this path is spiritually exalted, morally blameless, and exempt from all criticism.

With these facts in mind, it is little wonder that such a sanitized (if not, indeed, fictionalized) version of "Taoism" (like analogously sanitized versions of Zen) has proven irresistible to modern Westerners. This is the vision of "the Taoist path" that has made a cottage-industry out of publishing new versions of the Tao te ching, and has convinced more than a few young Westerners that they have finally found the only real truth of life -- sanitized even of the dross of their own Western heritage. The fact that such a vision of Taoism might not actually coincide with the documentable facts of the tradition's history, teachings, and practices has never been considered relevant, because the vision is too beautiful to surrender. Rather than have to sacrifice it on the altar of factuality, intellectuals like Fung Yu-lan and H. G. Creel happily accepted and perpetuated those interpretations of Chinese cultural history that preserve this lovely vision from all stain, real or imagined.

### **Conclusion**

If, however, we today choose to face the realities of Chinese history, we apparently must do so at the cost of losing the illusory though highly alluring vision of the unsullied Taoist path to individual self-perfection. As an element of traditional Chinese civilization, Taoism was a vastly richer and more complex reality, a reality to which we do terrible violence by attempting to maintain the quite dubious dichotomy of an original "pure" philosophical Taoism and a later, degenerate "popular" Taoism. Like Confucianism, which features both the pursuit of individual sagehood and a cult with temples, priests, and hymns to the divinity Confucius, Taoism is also a cultural tradition that embraces a wide array of social, moral, philosophical, and religious values and activities. It is really not difficult to suggest what holds Taoism together, for all of Taoism --



mystical and liturgical -- seems to share certain fairly clear values and ideals. The goals of Taoism, if I may be so bold, are simply as follows:

- (1) to help liberate people from heedless immersion in everyday, mundane realities;
- (2) to help reacquaint us with the broader context of our lives; and
- (3) to help reorient us toward the deeper, abiding realities within which our lives actually find their true meaning.

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<sup>i</sup> See H. G. Creel, "What is Taoism?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76 (1956), 139-152; reprinted in his *What is Taoism? and Other Studies in Chinese Cultural History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 1-24.

<sup>ii</sup> Michel Strickmann, "On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching," in Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, ed., *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 123-192, at pages 164-67.

<sup>iii</sup> Pertinent studies include Arthur F. Wright, "A Historian's Reflections on the Taoist Tradition," *History of Religions* 9 (1968-69), 248-55; Nathan Sivin, "On the Word 'Taoist' as a Source of Perplexity," *History of Religions* 17 (1978), 303-331; Norman J. Girardot, "'Let's Get Physical': The Way of Liturgical Taoism," *History of Religions* 23 (1983-84), 169-80; and John Lagerway, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* (New York and London: Macmillan / Collier Macmillan, 1987, pp. ix-xv, 265-91.

<sup>iv</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Derb Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1948; rpt. 1966), p. 3.

<sup>v</sup> See T. H. Barrett, "Ko Hung", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1986), VIII, 359-60; and Sivin, "On the Word 'Taoist' as a Source of Perplexity," 323-27.

<sup>vi</sup> Laurence G. Thompson, "What is Taoism? (With Apologies to H. G. Creel)," paper presented at the 1991 meeting of the American Oriental Society, Berkeley, California.

<sup>vii</sup> Thompson, op. cit.

<sup>viii</sup> Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991), 1-23.

<sup>ix</sup> Rodney L. Taylor, *The Way of Heaven: An Introduction to the Confucian Religious Life*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986.

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<sup>x</sup> See Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael Banton, ed.,

*Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 85-125; Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *ibid.*, 1-46.

<sup>xi</sup> Laurence G. Thompson, *The Chinese Way in Religion*. Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1973.

<sup>xii</sup> Taylor, *The Way of Heaven*, p. 17. Cf. Thompson, *The Chinese Way in Religion*, pp. 150-54.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, e.g., Russell Kirkland, "The Roots of Altruism in the Taoist Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986), 59-77, and my work in progress, *Taoist and Dynast: Political Dimensions of Taoism in T'ang China*.

<sup>xiv</sup> While the work of many current scholars deserve attention here, I shall note only the recent works by Livia Kohn, *Seven Steps to the Tao: Sima Chengzhen's Zuowanglun* (St. Augustin/Nettetal: Monumenta Serica Monograph #20, 1987), *Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), and *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Russell Kirkland, "The Making of an Immortal: The Exaltation of Ho Chih-chang," *Numen* 38 (1991-92), 201-214.

<sup>xv</sup> The same might be said for Confucianism: its religious dimension, one could argue, has been Protestantized by interpreters like Taylor and Tu Wei-ming to the point that there seems to be little meaningful explanation for the traditional Confucian cultus. One need hardly mention that Tu's vision of Confucianism is even more thoroughly sanitized, purified of any lingering cultural baggage that might put off the modern individual -- who would prefer to see the Confucian goal as a purely internal, abstract process of individual spiritual refinement, accessible to one and all. For example, Tu endeavors to purge Confucian ideals of the sexism that was implicit in the tradition before the twentieth century (or indeed, perhaps, the present generation). See, e.g., Tu Wei-ming, "Neo-Confucian Religiosity and Human-Relatedness," in his *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pages 131-148, at page 145.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Russell Kirkland, "The Last Taoist Grand Master at the T'ang Imperial Court: Li Han-kuang and T'ang Hsu-an-tung," *T'ang Studies* 4 (1986), 43-67; and *Taoist and Dynast*.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Kirkland, "The Making of an Immortal: The Exaltation of Ho Chih- chang."

<sup>xviii</sup> Cf. T. H. Barrett, *Li Ao: Buddhist, Taoist, or Neo-Confucian?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). It should be noted that, as Barrett demonstrates, the T'ang was a period of complex interaction among the traditions, not of any simple one-way causative influence.

<sup>xix</sup> These matters are addressed directly in my "Last Taoist Grand Master at the T'ang Imperial Court," and *Taoist and Dynast*.

<sup>xx</sup> In addition to Barrett's work, one should note a number of studies by Edward H. Schafer, especially his *Mirages on the Sea of Time: The Taoist Poetry of Ts'ao T'ang* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), especially pp. 1-15; "Wu Yu-n's 'Cantos on Pacing the Void'," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41 (1981), 377-415, and "Wu Yu-n's Stanzas on 'Saunters in Sylphdom'," *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1981-83), 1-37. Also noteworthy are several studies by Paul W. Kroll, such as "Verses from On High: The Ascent of T'ai Shan," *T'oung Pao* n.s. 69 (1983), 223-60.

<sup>xxi</sup> In addition to the studies previously cited, see further Russell Kirkland, "Taoists of the High T'ang: An Inquiry into the Perceived Significance of Eminent Taoists in Medieval Chinese Society" (Dissertation, Indiana University, 1986); Charles Benn, "Religious Aspects of Emperor Hsu-an-tung's Taoist Ideology," in *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987); and Franciscus Verellen, "Liturgy and Sovereignty: The Role of Taoist Ritual in the Foundation of the Shu Kingdom (907-925)" *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 2 (1989), 59-78.