

The Wisdom of China

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Lao Tse riding the buffalo

The Sterling Professor of Philosophy and Law at Yale University F. S. C. Northrop opens his classic study of world philosophy and religion, *The Meeting of East and West*, with the epigram by the Chinese philosopher, Mo Ti: "Where standards differ there will be opposition. But how can the standards of the world be unified?"

Good question. Northrop's answer, his plea, is for a synthesis of all world philosophies. However, he regards all systems of philosophy, past and present, no matter how incisive and compelling they may be, as at least partially outmoded by scientific knowledge. Thus he argues that modern man must achieve "a scientifically grounded philosophy adequate to the present accumulated total of factual knowledge and to all sides of human nature." Through this system no principles of any nation that have value would be excluded. The limitations that certain religions and restrictive philosophies have would be transcended, and man would come into his true estate. Then One World would be possible.

In the system that Northrop advocates we can at least see the kernel of what is inevitable. His is a veiled prophecy of the Coming Kingdom, in which men of all nations and tongues will be one family in Christ's love. In that sense it is well to remember the comment that Miss Clare Booth Luce made recently as she called for a return by America's people to the humble faith of our forefathers. She said, and the historian Dr. Henry Steele Commager agreed: We have plenty of knowledge today, more than enough; what we need is Wisdom.

Let us look at the wisdom of one nation. Taoism is one of the three spiritual kingdoms, so to speak, that has emerged over the centuries in China. The other two, which as religions were much more successful, were Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, also known as Mahayana Buddhism. Alas, Taoism, which first emerged in the third and fourth centuries B. C., seemed to soar, via the philosophical and mystical flight of its founder Lao Tzu, miles beyond the average Chinese citizen. The practical-minded Chinese would say "Let us follow Confucius, for he leads us somewhere. And let us keep away from 'the grand old boy' (as Lao Tzu was called) for he may take us up to dizzy heights in his wild flights."

Lao Tzu was called the grand old boy because, as the legend goes, when he was born he emerged from his mother's womb already an old man with snow-white hair. The reason he was this old was that he had actually been conceived 62 years earlier when his mother happened to gaze upon a falling star.

Other stories about Lao Tzu are equally unhistorical, but, nevertheless, interesting. One concerns the origin of the *Tao Te Ching*, the collection of sayings of Lao Tzu and the central scripture or text of the Taoists. Lao Tzu, after many years as a teacher, decided that the Chou dynasty was too corrupt and, mounting a water buffalo, he headed off through the mountains toward what is now Tibet, in search of a better kingdom. However the keeper of the Han-ku pass would not let him leave the kingdom until he left for the people an exposition of his wisdom. So the sage retired into the woods for three days and finally emerged with the slim volume of five thousand Chinese characters which we know as the *Tao Te Ching*.

Another Taoist tale reveals the feelings of the Taoists toward the contemporary of Lao Tzu, none other than Confucius. However, the latter teacher did not do so well in the audience allotted to him by Lao Tzu. Said Lao Tzu to Confucius in their legendary meeting in 517 B.C.: "I have heard it said that a clever merchant, though possessed of great hordes of wealth, will act as though his coffers were empty, and that the princely man, though of perfect moral excellence, maintains the air of a simpleton. Abandon your arrogant ways and countless desires, your suave demeanor and unbridled ambition, for they do not promote your welfare. That is all I have to say to you."

Taoism's place among the other great Oriental religions is well illustrated in a simple description given by the Korean, Young-hill Kang, in his autobiographical novel *The Grass Roof*. As you know, each of the Oriental religions is deeply embedded in the Korean psyche as well as in Korean life, and is reflected too in Korean Christianity. Kang notes that in his own family each member was attracted to a distinct doctrine. "My grandmother loved the stories and sayings of the pitying Buddha; my mother... because she was a woman... was most attracted by the emotional elements of Buddhism." His down-to-earth and practical-minded father was a Confucianist. Who was a Taoist? Well, you see, he had this crazy-poet uncle.

My first true contact with Lao Tzu came, ironically enough, just after my gradual conversion, or more aptly, my slow growth into Christianity, via the Roman Catholic Church of Spain. I had been attending mass daily, when possible, for about four months, when over a period of several days there emerged a great desire in me to relate Oriental mysticism, which I had read in a cursory fashion many years before, to St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, as well as to Jesus' own brand of mysticism. The problem then was, where does one find a copy of the Bhagavad Gita or the Tao Te Ching in San Luis de Sabinillas, a generally illiterate village of fishermen and gypsies? Impossible! So I more or less let that idea float on through my bamboo hut, down the white sand, and out into the blue Mediterranean.

However, just a few days later, I had walked to a slightly larger village nearby on a type of Robin Hood mission. I went door to door asking for old clothes, which I was to bring back to some very kind but poor families, some of whom were gypsies. As luck would have it, I came to one house where a young Dutch couple were spending their vacation. They invited me in as they went to look for something to give. In silent astonishment I saw several paperback books sprawled out across the table, among them the Bhagavad Gita and the Tao Te Ching. Inside, I felt an inner spiritual surge, as if to say "There are your books." But I remained quiet, waiting for the man to return. He brought out a pair of pants and a belt (which, incidentally, fit very nicely the lonely old night watchman Valero, who used to supply me with very juicy figs, though he never would tell me where the fig tree was). Then before I could even think about how those special books would change hands, the young Dutchmen said in very good English, "Would you have any need for some paperback books? We're leaving tomorrow and we have too much luggage as it is." In such a fashion I picked up Lao Tzu.

Back by the sea I pored over page after page of Lao Tzu. And what I found through his sayings was an encounter with the same God that I had seen through Jesus, speaking through a different teacher in a different land in a different age. Actually it could have been lifted right out of my New Testament.

As Jesus had said, "Whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased," Lao Tzu said "He who is to be laid low must first be exalted to power." As Jesus said "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it," Lao Tzu wrote "He who aims at life achieves death." Jesus said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all." Lao Tzu had written, "The sage puts himself last and finds himself in the foremost place." And as Jesus had announced "Behold the Lamb of God which beareth the sin of the world," Lao Tzu had foretold, "Who bears himself the sins of the world is the king of the world."

In short I found the Tao Te Ching to be a good companion to my Bible and a confirmation of a sort that the truths that Jesus taught -- which I had come to accept in a very real way -- were both eternal and universal. The Tao or First Cause that Lao Tzu described as "Something formlessly fashioned, existing long before heaven and earth, without substance... unchanging, all-pervading, unailing... the mother of all things under heaven" was the same Being that had finally revealed Himself to me as the one true Essence that lay beyond the kaleidoscope of sensory and material sensation that had enraptured me, but yet entangled me for 23 years.

The Tao or Superior Way was the Light that had come into the world, the Force, the magic moral power that had been released two thousand years ago in Nazareth, that had inspired the saints of every culture, and that had finally broken through, outside of time and space, into my own consciousness. I could exclaim with Lao Tzu "Sounds of music, smell of good dishes, will make the passing stranger pause. How different the words the Tao gives forth! So thin, so flavorless! If one looks for the Tao there is nothing solid to see; if one listens for it, there is nothing loud enough to hear. Yet if one uses it, it is inexhaustible."

The mysterious Tao became the mysterious Spirit of the New Testament, described in John: "The wind bloweth where it listed, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and

whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit."

Of course there are great distinctions between Lao Tzu and Jesus. Though the Tao of Lao Tzu approaches the Logos in the Gospel of John, it is often depicted as impersonal and incomprehensible, vague and elusive. While it is true that God may sometimes appear that way to us, more often as Christians we experience the Word that was in the beginning as a living personality, the expression of God's divine love and redeeming grace, and the manifestation of man's highest possibilities. And if not, then we should. The Heavenly Father that Jesus revealed is so real and so close to us that we can completely surrender our lives to Him, saying, "In Him we live, and move, and have our being."

Taoism as a philosophy senses the presence of God and Lao Tzu writes about it from man's point of view and a very wise man's point of view at that. But Jesus on the other hand was sent by God to become the central figure of a spiritual nation which was destined to determine the future of the entire planet and cosmos, heaven and earth. The newly born Christianity was installed by God to become a beacon for all men until the Final Days when His kingdom will come, His Will shall be done. That is, Christianity was born from God's direct point of view. However, given the fact that we have found our salvation and meaning in life through Christ and God's word in the Old and New Testaments, it is instructive and refreshing to see the roots of other cultures, to whom we have the mission to introduce the God that Jesus reveals.

Another Taoist companion I picked up in India. His name is Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu's foremost later disciple who, with the author of the Tao Te Ching, are the two towering figures in Taoism. Chuang Tzu is no less inscrutable, no less profound, no less cheerful and no less charming. Many of you have probably heard some of his stories recorded in the collection of his writings. One tale finds Chuang Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly. He did not know that he had ever been anything but a butterfly and was content to hover from flower to flower. Suddenly he woke and found to his astonishment that he was Chuang Tzu. But it was hard to be sure whether he was really Chuang Tzu and had only dreamt that he was a butterfly, or was really a butterfly, and was only dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu.

A second story that impressed me is called "Three in the Morning." This tale looks at the foibles of human nature that we encounter daily. Have you ever tried to get something from another, that the other person knows he has to give, such as a visa from a stubborn guard at a border, yet the person obstinately resists, almost in an irrational manner. Then, you put the matter slightly differently, though you shouldn't have had to, and the person relents. Well, this is called "three in the morning." What does Chuang Tzu mean by three in the Morning? When the monkey trainer was handing out acorns, he said to the monkeys, "You get three in the morning and four at night." This made all the monkeys furious. "Well, then," said the trainer, "you get four in the morning and three at night." With this, the monkeys were all delighted. There was no change in the reality behind the words, and yet the monkeys responded once with anger and once with joy. Says Chuang Tzu, "Let them if they want to."

If Chuang Tzu can capture the irony of life, or the irrational parts of our nature, he also tries to be in tune with natural and spiritual law, in a sense, the divine principles of the universe, what he calls sovereign law. This is illustrated in the account of his strange behavior after his wife's death. Receiving the news of her death, Hui Tzu, a good friend, came to join Chuang Tzu at the rites of mourning at his house. To his surprise he saw Chuang Tzu sitting with an inverted bowl on his knees, drumming upon it and singing a song. Hui Tzu was shocked and said "After all she lived with you, brought up your children, grew old along with you. That you should not mourn for her is bad enough; but to let your friends find you drumming and singing -- that is going too far!"

"You misjudge me," said Chuang Tzu. "When she died, I was in despair, as any man might well be. But soon pondering on what had happened, I told myself in death no strange new fate befalls us. In the beginning we lacked not life only but form. Not form only, but spirit. We are blended in the one great featureless mass. Then a time came when the mass evolved spirit, spirit evolved form, form evolved life. And now life in its turn has evolved death. For not nature only but man's being has its seasons, its sequence of spring and summer, autumn and winter. If someone is tired and has gone to lie down, we do not pursue him with shouting and bawling. She whom I have lost has lain down to sleep for a while in the Great Inner Room. To break in upon her rest with the noise of lamentation would but show that I knew nothing of nature's Sovereign Law. That is why I ceased to mourn."

As a footnote to this fleeting glimpse of Taoist thought, it should be mentioned that, strictly speaking, Taoism, or the Taoist Church, was far removed from the teachings of Lao Tzu and eventually only appealed to the more superstitious and less educated of the Chinese. Besides philosophical Taoism, which we have been discussing, and let me say here that I of course am no scholar on this subject, and must trust those who have studied Chinese to master the nuance and subtlety of the ancient sages, several other brooks flowed into the pool that became historical Taoism. A form of Chinese yoga and breath control was one. Alchemy, magic and the belief in mysterious elixirs of immortality were others. Several Taoist emperors even sent expeditions looking for islands said to be filled with immortal beings called "Isles of the Blest."

Then a whole parade of deities entered the pool. There was the Jade Emperor, who as the supreme god received an annual report from a lesser being known as the God of the Stove, or the Kitchen God. There was an image of the kitchen god in many homes to remind householders at the end of the year the God of the Stove would report each family's actions to the Jade Emperor. A third divinity also won a place in the Chinese home, and also a place in my heart -- if for nothing else than his name. He is called The Celestial Honoured Being of the Jade Dawn and the Golden Gate. All these of course are very colorful, yet quite far from the clear-cut and profound cosmology of Lao Tzu and the Tao.

The twentieth century has been fatal however for the Taoist Church. The last of the Taoist secret societies were abolished by Mao early in his campaign and they have been effectively silenced since then. However, Lao Tzu lives on, among other ways, in numerous new translations of his book, in Zen Buddhism, which scholars say is the true inheritor of the ironic mysticism of the "Old Boy," and also of course, however slightly, in the Unification Church. One way is as a passing reference in every "Chapter One" lecture of the Divine Principle, but the other is much more embryonic and significant.

Our spiritual guides and ministers from the Orient bear the wisdom of a culture that in the noted psychoanalyst Carl Jung's words is in many ways more civilized than that of our primitive Teutonic race. Perhaps it is Lao Tzu as well as Christ who has come to us in the guise of our Korean and Japanese brothers and sisters to help us salvage our nation and religious traditions from the barbarism of Communism. Though I am the first to admit that perhaps America's greatest need right now is not the mysticism of Lao Tzu, but rather a real stiff shot of the familial and societal code of conduct of Confucius, or better still a true, living Christianity which alone will heal our disintegrating marriages, families and self-respect. Yet I look forward to the day of victory over atheism, which will have been won by the hands and voices of every man or woman who found God, and "God's Way," including Lao Tzu. Perhaps then, in a restored world, where we will find an even greater synthesis than Northrop imagines, a True Family of God, the dream of the Kingdom which we are fighting and praying for, and which God through His Grace has promised to those who love Him, we can go into the mountains of our souls and behold Lao Tzu's Perfect Way in the entirety of creation, but especially in the eyes of all those humans who have yearned for perfection and God's love this long.