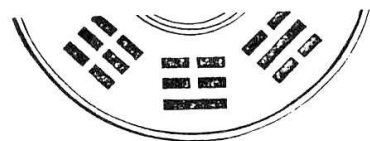


# UNDERSTANDING



# THE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE OF CHINA



by Aloysius Chang

I recently attended a conference where orthodox Chinese religions were examined in great detail by a group of Asian scholars, most of whom were not Chinese. My overall impression of the conference was that while Chinese religions have had a highly visible and often controversial presence down through the centuries, they are still approached by modern scholars as somewhat arcane. The exchange of ideas and the variety of interpretations offered by the participants, I found to be quite stimulating, if a bit on the dogmatic side; and I came away with further confirmation of my underlying conviction that there is still a wide gulf separating the mentalities of East and West. Western philosophy is characterized by a kind of dualism that governs its approach to both the concrete world and the world of ideas. Instead of a review of what Chinese religions were in the past and are now in the present, much of the discussion turned on what Chinese religions should be. As a result, the conference often threatened to degenerate into a tutorial on how the Chinese might become truly Chinese and learn to behave accordingly.

The Chinese cultural tradition excels in a number of areas. It conspicuously embraces a continuity of history that not only jealousy guards traditional Chinese living patterns, but also reinforces a strong sense of their cultural identity. These characteristics comprise the inner core of Chinese civilization. The underlying supposition of this deep-seated sense of continuity and identity is, of course, the conviction that they live, act, and have their being according to the will of heaven (Tian). This explains why the Chinese in the course of their long history have been profoundly affected by religious teachings and disciplines, which have subsequently become an integral part of the soul of their civilization.

The Chinese are by nature faithful followers of their cultural tradition and consider its literary classics their greatest cultural treasure. Most are quite familiar with their content, especially their moral teachings. The classics throughout the centuries have served as

the guideline for Chinese morality and have provided them with the ethical codes that govern much of their behaviour. Even further, these works have given impetus and incentive to the formation of an organized social order based on right reason and cultivation of the person. They have also provided an ethical rationale for the centrality of family life among the Chinese, and a universal vision that sees in human history the gradual but sure movement of a peace and harmony which will eventually embrace all mankind.

The Chinese classics deal primarily with moral and philosophical problems. They may lack a Christian perspective but they are nonetheless very religious. Given a proper interpretation, they are ideal instruments for explaining the Christian message. Psychologically, such an approach is most satisfying for the Chinese. Unfortunately in the past, some Christian authors considered them as purely literary works, and neglected their homiletic value. Others wrongly judged them to be a negative influence--full of superstition and essentially agnostic and anti-Christian.

The principal organized religions of China include Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Islam. Although actual membership figures are highly speculative, their influence is undeniable. They represent a sizeable force not only in China, but also in the total religious population of the world. The question of religious organizations gives rise to a further question; namely, is the religious heritage of China truly religious in the conventional sense? Just how "religious" are the Chinese?

The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine the broader religious heritage of China and the many similarities it shares with the Christian tradition.

## **I. WHAT IS RELIGION: INSTITUTION OR CONVICTION?**

In recent years, studies of religion have offered many new and refreshing insights as the focus has widened considerably. Aside from its traditionally close relationship to theology and philosophy, religion is also now being examined in connection with anthropology, archaeology, history, psychology and sociology. It is neither necessary nor advisable for us here to review all the interpretations and definitions of religion, satisfactory or otherwise.

Generally speaking, religion consists of the belief in the existence of some supernatural or superhuman reality as a creative and ruling force controlling the course of nature and human life. As a con-

sequence of this belief, man is conscious of his radical dependence and manifests his obedience through prayers of praise and supplication. True religious belief involves the element of personal relationship between man and his God.

A second aspect of religion appears as a consequence of the fundamental act of belief and consists of this awareness of his dependence and his response in obedience being expressed through ritual activity. Offerings, prayers of propitiation and petitions are often made manifest through songs and dances; all of which underline the basic relationship of man to God.

From the beginning of history, culture and religion have shared an intimate relationship. The very existence of a culture reveals the substructure of a spiritual matrix of religious beliefs and convictions that establish a culture's standards of moral behaviour and reflect its highest values. In this sense it can be said that the Chinese religious heritage, particularly that of Confucianism and Taoism, has been the central unifying force of traditional Chinese culture.

With the spread of Christianity in the West, religion became more of a social entity and thus more institutionalized, taking the form of distinctive communities, groups or churches within the larger culture. Cultural religion gave way to revealed religion, especially the Christian religion and enjoyed a privileged place in societies. It emphasized strong ties among members and defined dogmas and liturgies which were exclusive of other religious expressions. As a result non-Christian religions were looked upon as false worship and inane superstitions. God no longer is the father of all, but only of the chosen few. All of Western culture is permeated by sharp distinctions between God and man, absolute and relative, soul and body, heaven and hell, reward and punishment, truth and falsehood, Christianity and paganism.

For the average Chinese, however, religion is not an institution, not something external, but rather the cultivation of one's own interior life and making the best possible response to one's situation. It is precisely in this sense that religion for the Chinese is considered to be something relative and thus man made. The interior attitude of man is what is most important, and it manifests itself as a harmony of intuition and affection.

Although there is great diversity in contemporary definitions of religion, they all seem to have one thing in common—they all indicate a categorical value in the phenomenon that a man calls religion. It is

interesting to note that the piety, wisdom and philosophical profundity of the Oriental religions are clearly excluded from such definitions.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

The philosophy of life and religious heritage of the Chinese people are deeply rooted in their traditional cultural patterns. The Chinese love peace and order and show great respect for authority. Their traditional structures produced a basic social stability and high standards of morality. They are also aware of their long history of cultural pre-eminence. When the missionaries first entered China, they were amazed to find such a highly developed culture and civilization, and also commented upon the purity of the Chinese religious heritage.

The religious heritage of the Chinese differs in many ways from that found in Western civilization and the Christian tradition. Because the Chinese religious heritage is not seen as religious in the conventional, accepted Western sense,— Chinese religions are generally not organized into specific sectarian communities, have no Founding Fathers, nor formal canons of sacred writing,— some observers are inclined to dismiss it as not religious at all. Yet it would be a grave mistake to conclude from this that the Chinese are agnostics or atheists. Let us examine briefly some of the essential characteristics of the Chinese religious heritage.

The fundamental attitude of the Chinese religious heritage is humanistic rather than speculative. For the Chinese, religion is not a matter of philosophical or theological discussion but an engagement of a will that moves the heart. "Our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active." (1 John 3:18)

Another aspect of the Chinese approach to religion is that it is eclectic rather than dogmatic. The Chinese are firmly convinced all religions teach man to be virtuous and do what is right. In their view, all religious teachings supplement each other and are by no means mutually exclusive. There exists an essential unity in the midst of their apparent diversity. Furthermore, this plays havoc with any attempt to divide the sum of the religious membership statistically. A sincere Confucianist will often register as a Taoist as well. This kind of religious syncretism strikes Westerners as simply impossible. ("No one can serve two masters" or "Who is not with me, is against me.") But the Chinese think otherwise, and are firmly convinced that all roads lead to the capital city, or, in the words of Confucius, that the whole world is one commonwealth where harmony and equality prevail.



Finally, the Chinese religious heritage in practice is both personal and social. Perhaps, in this sense the Chinese can be said to believe that the individual is a man of two religions. On the one hand, he strives to act in conformity with his personal goals and ideals of life, neither questioning nor demanding his rights. On the other hand, as a member of a family and the larger society, he has corresponding obligations to fulfill. In doing both, he seeks to harmonize and perfect the total expression of his own human behaviour. The Confucian wu lun (five relations) are faithfully practiced, and they still control the life patterns of the Chinese people.



Further analysis reveals that the Chinese firmly believe in God, whom they call Tian (Heaven) or Dao (the Way), and their belief is essentially monotheistic. They place an unconditional trust in the moral order and eventual reward or punishment, if not in this life, then definitely in the life to come. They are also strongly convinced that, despite transitory changes, the real value and true meaning of life never alters.

### III. ARE CONFUCIANISM AND TAOISM RELIGIONS?

Confucianism, or Rujia as the Chinese call it, is the synthesis of the teachings of Confucius, the great master. It is also the underlying philosophy of the traditional and, perhaps, typical Chinese social system. It furnishes a theoretical rationale for the role of the family and outlines a rational social order through an ethical approach which is based on the cultivation of the person.

The Confucian discipline imposes various moral obligations and responsibilities. As an individual, man is to center his whole life on the perfection of his personality. As a member of the family, man is responsible for all that is directly related to other members of his household; which calls for the diligent practice of virtues related to the laws of nature and tradition. Finally as a member of the larger society, man is expected to know well his role and make every effort to

achieve peace and order in society according to guidelines inspired by the classical writings.

The central idea of Confucian ethics is Ren (benevolence, love, humanity or virtue). Ren embraces a heart of love, which is an integral part of man's nature. It generally involves two interrelated aspects: Ren is considered one of the cardinal virtues, expressing itself in love for others; and Jen is also THE virtue or the highest ideal of mankind which embraces all other virtues. More than two thousand years have gone by since the time of Confucius, but his teaching is still clearly visible.

The term TAOISM in English is confusing. The Chinese distinguish Daojia (Taoist School) and Daojiao (Taoist religion). Taoism as a sectarian religion began as a secret society in the second century under the leadership of Zhang Daoling. After a brief period of state patronage during the Tang dynasty (618-906), it has been practiced as a religion by the semi-literate class. On the other hand, Daojia, or philosophical Taoism, has been a major interest among religious scientists. It is a quietistic philosophy that strongly opposes any form of artificial interference with the natural course of the universe. The Taoist inclination is toward eremitism, individualistic spontaneity, and mystical harmony with nature, of which the DAO is the impersonal, prime-mover.

What then is the Dao? In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Dao De Jing we read: there was something, undifferentiated and yet complete, existing before heaven and earth, soundless and formless, self-sufficient and free from malevolent danger, it acts as the mother of the universe. Dao is the origin and absolute law of the universe. It is the true essence of all substances and ruler of all activities. It is glorious and majestic. It is eternal and indefinable. In one word, it is the mystery of mysteries.

The whole system of Taoist philosophy is based on the Dao and directs man in his natural element to strive to know nature and never act in a way that contradicts the dictum of nature. Further analysis reveals Taoist philosophy to be highly mystical and speculative. It engages in an unceasing effort to search for what is absolute and immortal, where one finds true freedom and real space. For the Taoist, life is indeed worth living, and each individual effort should be directed towards prolonging and enjoying it here in this world.

Can Confucianism and Taoism be rightfully called religions? The fact is when discussing both Confucianism and Taoism many contemporary

authors answer in the affirmative. If, however, the term "religion" is defined in conventional terms as an institution, then, contrary to the opinion of such authors, Confucianism and Taoism are definitely not formal religions. Both Confucius and Lao Tzu never intended to found a specific religion, and they never publicly preached faith in or belief in an almighty deity.

On the other hand, although Confucianism and Taoism, while ethical and metaphysical, are not religions in the conventional sense, yet these disciplines, or jiao in Chinese are extremely religious in their very nature. And while the majority of Chinese are not members of a formal institutional religion, they are nevertheless extremely religious.

## CONCLUSION

It is paradoxical to take note of the fervent religious attitudes and habits of the Chinese while judging them at the same time to be irreligious and atheistic according to conventional standards. However, it is important to remember that the Western mentality is heavily rationalist and positivist in its approach, while the Oriental mind tends to be intuitive and situational. In the Western world, religion is seen as a social phenomenon which supports social stability. In the East, religion is seen as the cultivation of one's own interior life. Western religions tend towards exclusivism, while a feeling of universality dominates the religious heritage of China.

The Chinese people are by nature lovers of their own traditions and disciplines. It is precisely their culture and tradition that have nurtured their deeply religious sensitivity which is expressed in their social relationships and the high standards of their moral behaviour. Their way of life already disposes them, like fertile soil, to accept readily the way of absolute truth, beauty and goodness.

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