

MYSTICAL ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHRISTIAN-DAOIST INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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Abstract:

The Daoist classics are convinced that mysticism is a necessary condition for a productive life. At first glance, this may seem a paradox. Daoist sages do not seek effectiveness, external results or success but rather, unity with Dao. Their fundamental and most important purpose is one – to live by the principles of Dao. In fact the Daoist classics are sure that authentic mysticism cannot remain fruitless. Isn't Daoism overly naive by accenting a leader's virtuousness and interior, mystical life? Can such a viewpoint be seriously assessed today, when the major roles in ruling democratic countries are played out by laws and transparently operating national institutions? The philosophy of Daoism does not deny the significance of laws but merely emphasizes that a virtuous governmental official is no less necessary to the successful evolvement of a country than is a good base of laws.

This paper analyzes the essential parameters of mysticism in Daoism and their relationship with social life. The Christian view on Daoist mysticism assists in highlighting the special valuable elements of this teaching and their meanings in the sphere of public life.

Key Words: Daoism, Mysticism, *Kenosis*, Social responsibility, Interfaith dialogue

Introduction

The image of the heron standing in a body of calm water, which is so well liked in Chinese visual arts, conveys the mystical lifestyle of a Daoist sage. It seems the heron is doing nothing but resting, probably snoozing. The heron's inactivity first refers to the Daoist wuwei (non-action) principle. A Daoist sage lives as if engaged in nothing, submerged in silence and devoid of earthly ambitions. Such a contemplative lifestyle could appear similar to idleness. Nonetheless, the existence of the Daoist sage is maximally concentrated, vigilant and purpose-directed. The heron symbolizes absolute calm that is, at the same time, absolute attentiveness of the existing state. A heron does not squander its attention and inner resources: it is not a curiosity seeker and does not glance around at its surroundings. Nonetheless, it observes the surroundings and sees everything that appears important and necessary to it. It is on watch duty. The image of the Daoist heron is reminiscent of the urging in the Gospel to be vigilant. Jesus spoke repeatedly to his disciples about the importance of vigilance, "And what I am saying to you I say to all: Stay awake!" (Mark 13: 37). Vigilance has become a Christian feature, which particularly was practiced in the monastic vocation. The Fathers of the Church and the later Christian spiritual teachers were fond of comparing clear and muddy waters. For muddy water to become clear, it must settle calmly, in the same as a person must achieve peacefulness in the soul, to be able to see God within a now, purified soul. The book of *Wenzi* speaks very similarly, "No one uses flowing water for a mirror, still water is used for a mirror. By keeping thus inwardly, you become still and are not scattered outwardly."¹⁶¹

The Daoist lifestyle encourages controlling heated actions and fostering inner peace. The focused and calm sage is able to direct his entire inner energy—qi—in the proper direction. Nothing is

¹⁶¹ *Wenzi*, 94. After in 1973 a [bamboo](#) manuscript of the *Wenzi* dated to 55 B.C. was found in the tomb of King Huai near Dingzhou in [Hebei](#), Eastern China, the *Wenzi* was re-classified as one of the most important texts of the Daoist philosophical heritage. All citations are from the only existing English translation of *Wenzi* to date: T. Cleary, *Wen-tzu. Understanding the Mysteries. Further Teachings of Lao-tzu*, Boston & London, 1992.

more important to a heron than catching a fish; nothing is more important to the human than to decipher the mystery of life and to concentrate power on the most important purpose of life.

This paper analyzes the essential parameters of mysticism in Daoism and their relationship with social life. The Christian view on Daoist mysticism assists in highlighting the special valuable elements of this teaching and their meanings in the sphere of public life.

Effectiveness of Daoist mysticism

The Daoist classics are convinced that mysticism is a necessary condition for a productive life. At first glance, this may seem a paradox. After all Daoist sages do not seek effectiveness, external results or success but rather, unity with Dao. Their fundamental and most important purpose is one – to live by the principles of Dao. In fact the Daoist classics are sure that authentic mysticism cannot remain fruitless. In and of itself, it traces a diverse effectiveness.

When mountains are high, clouds and rain form on them, when waters are deep, dragons are born in them; when ideal people reach the Way, the richness of virtue flows in them. Those who have hidden virtues will surely have manifest rewards; those who do good deeds in secret will surely have illustrious reputations.¹⁶²

Wenzi compares the sage to a high mountain and a body of deep waters. Two images that are the opposite of one another are used here. However, they are specifically best at revealing the characteristics of a sage. The Daoist sage is not a one-sided personage. If a sage is able to achieve oneness with Dao, then various, positive features, or as Wenzi asserts, the “richness of virtue” manifest in that sage. By his knowledge and wisdom, the sage is similar to a high mountain where its shade offers pleasant refreshment from the sweltering midday heat; and by the sage’s goodwill – to the body of deep water, a favorable sphere for the growth and for the development of living beings. Wenzi emphasizes that the mountain, as much as the body of water, influences the surroundings. The same way as the clouds, which gather around the mountain, water the parched earth with rain and as the deep waters form the conditions for habitation by the dragon – the symbol of goodwill, power and wisdom – thus, the sage who lives in oneness with Dao serves society with wisdom and goodwill. Additionally, since a sage has great insight, he/she often gives rise to social initiatives.

Daoism accents the meaningfulness of hidden virtues. These are more important than visible ones because they affect the internal resolve of a person. The person who has inner virtues surely has outward virtues as well, whereas the person who is satisfied with the outward alone (which Daoist tradition considers as inferior) faces the danger of becoming merely superficially virtuous. “Those who possess high virtues do not need [to engage in lower] virtue. Those who possess mundane virtues have to force themselves to be virtuous.”¹⁶³ It is not difficult to perceive the necessity of inner, hidden action and the power of inner virtues in all the teachings of classical Daoism. Inner action constitutes the foundation of any sort of outward activity. Inner quality creates external results in and of itself whereas, if only external results are sought without heed to the quality of inner life, then an unstable and unnecessary product is produced. The Daoist classics often mock outer virtues and point out their negligibility and incapability.

Wenzi chapter 97 unavoidably reminds us of the teachings of Jesus to contribute alms, pray and fast in secret (cf. Matthew 6: 1–18). Jesus emphasizes that our Heavenly Father shall reward people for such good works. Meanwhile the Daoist tradition highlights the self-effectiveness of hidden virtues and good works done in secret. Wenzi does not assert that Dao shall reward them. Nonetheless, it is to be understood that positive, secret action is in accord with the Way of Dao, thus it will meet with success and recompense.

Good works done in secret and hidden virtues are part of the Daoist sage’s day-to-day life. Texts of the Daoist classics do not say whether secret practices take up the greater part of a sage’s day. It can be guessed from certain areas in the book of Laozi that it depends on circumstances. A sage can devote a great deal of time to internal practices and good works done in secret, so long as

¹⁶² *Wenzi*, 97.

¹⁶³ *Cultivating Stillness. A Taoist Manual for Transforming Body and Mind*, Transl. Eva Wong, Boston & London, 1992, p. 107.

duties or life's circumstances do not force the sage to be involved in public activities. On the other hand, he can devote much time and energy to public activities and lessen his secret actions to a minimum. Nevertheless, a sage gives secret practices the priority.

Although a Daoist sage values hidden virtues more than he does public activity, his mysticism is not a purpose in and of itself. The technique of mystical life is not as important to the sage as is the realistic oneness with Dao. Such unity undoubtedly has numerous mystical elements but it is not only a hidden reality. Oneness with Dao encompasses the entire existence of a sage and manifests in the entirety of that sage's life. It is impossible to hide; the same as a city built on a hilltop or a light placed on the lamp-stand (cf. Matthew 5: 14-15).

The way of humility: Nothing can surpass water

A Daoist sage seeks to live in harmony with nature and its processes. Of its own accord, this encourages the sage to create harmony in the community. Thus the entire essence of the sage is devoted to the needs of the community. He is convinced that harmony in communal life springs from goodwill, which is grounded in a close individual relationship with Dao. If a sense of duty bases the public activities of a Confucian sage then, for a Daoist sage, it is the mystical unity with Dao. Duty, whether an internal or external obligation, from the perspective of a Daoist sage, is not able to generate stable wellbeing in the life of a community for long. Therefore, the Daoist sage bases his/her social obligations on intensive mystical practices and the pursuit of all-encompassing harmony.

The way of heaven is to reduce what is much to add to what is little; the way of earth is to decrease what is high to augment what is low. [...] The way of humanity is not to give to those who have much. The way of sages is humility that no one can overmaster.¹⁶⁴

The way or the task of heaven and earth is to create harmony in nature by adding what nature lacks at this time and reducing what is overabundant. The vocation of people is to create harmony in the community by reducing poverty and social inequality. It is understood in and of itself that a sage performs what is known as the way of all humankind. Despite this, Wenzhi makes a clear distinction between common people and sages. If all people must have compassion for one another and help each other, then the vocation of a sage is to seek mysterious humility. Wenzhi expresses the conviction that a sage cannot limit his life only to social activity. His vocation lies in the way of humility. Here, however, we would greatly delude ourselves if we understood humility in a narrow sense. In Daoism humility associates with water and its uncontrollable force. Water on its way surmounts all obstacles; that is why Laozi said about water that "nothing can surpass it".¹⁶⁵ Yet water is a symbol of Dao itself. Thereby, humility, as the way of the sage, implies the dimension of transcendental life. The mystical unity of a sage with Dao lays the groundwork for an exceptional moral and spiritual power to manifest in that sage's life.¹⁶⁶

Although humility is one of the virtues in Christianity, it takes on special meaning in the writings of distinguished theologians. As Doctor of the Church Isidore of Seville was pointing out the etymological link of humility (Latin *humilitas*) with earth (Latin *humus*), he came close to identifying humility with the spiritual fertility of the entirety of Christian life: the same as the earth sprouts fruit in ripened plants, so humility brings forth matured virtues and successful activity.¹⁶⁷ Thomas Aquinas believed that humility eliminates the obstacles between a human being and God: "Thus humility is, as it were, a disposition to man's untrammelled access to spiritual and divine goods."¹⁶⁸ The Doctor Angelicus concluded that "*humilitas facit hominem capacem Dei*" ("humility makes the human receptive to God")¹⁶⁹ and, akin to the tradition of Daoism, stressed that "*humilitas ad*

¹⁶⁴ Wenzhi, 95.

¹⁶⁵ Laozi, 78. Translation by D. C. Lau.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. R. Dulskis, *The Purpose of Human Existence and the Meaning of Immortality in Daoism*. In: *The Philosophical Basis of Inter-religious Dialogue: The Process Perspective*. Editor: M. Patalon. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 109-120.

¹⁶⁷ *Etymologiae*, lib. X, ad litt. H.: „*humilis dicitur quasi humi acclinis*“. In: Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, Roma, 1962, II, II, 161, 1.

¹⁶⁸ *Summa theologiae*, II, II, 161, 5.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In Mattheum*, 11. In: Thomas von Aquin, *Sentenzen über Gott und die Welt*, Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2000, p. 166.

sapientiam disponit” (“humility prepares for wisdom”).¹⁷⁰ Thereby, authors both on Daoism and on Christianity agree that humility and wisdom are closely interrelated. These two qualities support one another and lay the premises for a mature mystical experience as much as for the social realization of human vocation.

Kenosis and social responsibility

Nonetheless, Daoism asserts yet another meaning of humility. To be precise, it would be appropriate to name it as an essential dimension of the virtue of humility. Although it is associated with the image of water, it reaches much further. Laozi talks about “being the valley of the world”:

Know glory and keep to humility
[or disgrace as translated by J. Legge and D. C. Lau].
Become the valley of the world.
Being the valley of the world is eternal power.¹⁷¹

The image of the valley identifies with the image of water: a river flows in a valley, the waters of which moisten the earth. The Daoist sage consciously decides to be like a valley: this means, to follow Dao and serve people in the most noble manner. Such a decision demands determination and magnanimity because it is the choice for a self-sacrificing lifestyle. The Chinese character 辱 (rǔ) which, in Laozi chapter 28, appears as the antithesis of the character 榮 (róng), meaning glory, is differently translated by various sinologists: as humility by Sanderson Beck, disgrace by James Legge and D. C. Lau, and obscurity by Lin Yutang. Thus, here, Laozi talks about the sage’s lifestyle that is related to the kenosis of Christ. The Daoist sage is similar to the image of the suffering Servant presented in The Book of Isaiah: “I have offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; I have not turned my face away from insult and spitting” (Isaiah 50:6).

This idea is expanded even more in Laozi chapter 78. The author says that a sage dares to bear the humiliation (or reproach) of the people and to take upon him/herself the calamities (or direful woes or sins) of the society.

Those who bear the humiliation (or reproach as translated by J. Legge) of the people are able to minister to them.

Those who take upon themselves the sins¹⁷² (direful woes as translated by J. Legge or calamities by D. C. Lau) of the society are able to lead the world.¹⁷³

What is Laozi talking about here? Are these vital truths of life or merely poetic, philosophical considerations detached from the reality of the world? How is it possible to take upon him/herself the humiliation of the people and the calamities of the society? And, even if this were possible, what is the meaning of it? The book of Laozi does not undertake any comprehensive answer to these questions. It merely underscores that such behavior is very necessary for society and that such persons “are able to lead the world”. However, Laozi does not explain his view on this. The book merely outlines the most important principles of a sage’s life, which often sound paradoxical. Nevertheless, Laozi notes that paradoxes specifically reveal the truth of life: “Words of truth seem paradoxical”.¹⁷⁴

Certain attitudes of the Daoist classics appear nearly identical to the teaching by the Apostle Paul on the following of Christ. Paul comprehends the humility of Christ as an all encompassing, generous devotion to the Father: “He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Philippians 2: 8), and he urges his followers, “Make up your own mind of Christ Jesus” (Philippians

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, 8, 3 ad 8. In: *Ibidem*.

¹⁷¹ *Laozi*, 28. Translation by Sanderson Beck.

¹⁷² 不祥 literally is *non-blessing*.

¹⁷³ *Laozi*, 78. Translation by Sanderson Beck.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

2: 5). This sounds much like the urging by Laozi to become like a valley and accept the humiliation and the calamities of the world. Paul says, much like Laozi does, that Christ knew the glory of His Father but maintained humility: “Who being in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of slave” (Philippians 2: 6–7). Nonetheless, there is an obvious difference between the two religious traditions on this issue. The New Testament talks about the kenosis of Christ and considers Him as an example for all the faithful, whereas Daoist texts recommend the kenotic lifestyle to all sages appealing to the social fruitfulness of such a choice.

Mysticism and political insight

Confucianism, as much as Daoism, pays a great deal of attention in its doctrine to the virtuousness of rulers. Both teachings express the conviction that the rule of a country will not be successful if their rulers are not virtuous and noble. However, Daoism goes even further in talking about the vocation of rulers for a mystical life:

If rulers are not humble to their subjects, the influence of their virtue will not be effective. Therefore, when rulers are humble to their subjects they are lucid and clear, and when they are not humble to their subjects they are blind and deaf.¹⁷⁵

A wise ruler is “like a river, which is flavorless but endlessly useful”.¹⁷⁶ Flavorlessness refers to the rejection of any sort of egoism and harmful ambitions. The river is not concerned about its image; its water simply carries all that is necessary for nature – for plants, for animals and for people. River waters refresh the earth, sustain life and ripen the new harvest. That, according to the Daoist classics, is how a ruler should be: a ruler should not be making efforts towards self-aggrandizement but upholding good initiatives by the citizens and fostering the nation.¹⁷⁷ Humbleness gives rulers insight because, due to their humbleness, they do not distance themselves from the problems of the common people. The Daoist classics are convinced that, when first and foremost a ruler follows Dao, that ruler understands his vocation to serve his country and its people. By being concerned with performing his duties appropriately, the ruler gains insight and wisdom. Otherwise, when a ruler distances himself from Dao, he loses virtues and, by the same token, is no longer capable of concern for true justice and honesty in his own country. Then the harmony of communal life goes askew, and honest officials of the country are forced to withdraw:

When the sun emerges over the horizon, beings grow; when true leaders preside over the populace, they illumine the virtues of the Way thereby. When the sun goes down below the horizon, beings rest; when petty people preside over the populace, everyone runs and hides.¹⁷⁸

Isn't Daoism overly naive by accenting a leader's virtuousness and interior, mystical life? Can such a viewpoint be seriously assessed today, when the major roles in ruling democratic countries are played out by laws and transparently operating national institutions? The philosophy of Daoism does not deny the significance of laws but merely emphasizes that a virtuous governmental official is no less necessary to the successful evolvement of a country than is a good base of laws. Social ethics, according to the Daoist classics, cannot rely on itself of its own accord, but must rest on an inner, personal relationship with Dao. If the foundation of social ethics in Confucianism consists of the personally obligating Tian ming or Will of Heaven, then in Daoism, it is the mystical unity with Dao that encompasses a person's entire existence.

Not only a ruler of a country but also each and every person holding a responsible position, has the vocation for a mystical life. If such a person does not live the mystical life, that person lacks

¹⁷⁵ *Wenzi*, 95.

¹⁷⁶ *Wenzi*, 82.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. L. Kohn, *Daoist Mystical Philosophy. The Scripture of Western Ascension*, New York, 2007, pp. 156–158.

¹⁷⁸ *Wenzi*, 95.

insight. It will be difficult for such a person to grasp the true designation of human existence. He/she makes an essential error in life and thereby impoverishes the self. This person in his/her life sets purposes, which does not conform to the way of Dao. Since there is no other reality than that of Dao, such a person begins to live a life of illusions. It will seem to this person that his/her way is “knowledgeable and bright”,¹⁷⁹ and such an erroneous, good opinion about the self only deepens his/her life’s tragedy. Due to erroneously comprehending the self, such a person also lacks perception in many areas of social life. The Daoist classics emphasize how important it is for a ruler to have sufficient insight for ruling a nation. Such insight, according to them, closely relates to a ruler’s experience with a mystical life. So long as a ruler lives in unity with Dao, that ruler is capable of building a country where righteousness and other virtues predominate. The citizens of such a country, as *Wenzi* says, feel satisfied with their duties and the results of their work. “Merchants make their markets convenient, farmers enjoy their fields, officials are secure in their jobs, independent scholars practice their ways and people in general enjoy their work.”¹⁸⁰ On the contrary, when virtuousness diminishes in a society, then production and business diminish, taxes rise disproportionately and punishments must be meted out more and more often to maintain order. A faulty situation forms in the country, however it is not permissible to criticize it, critics are punished, and the virtuous are dismissed.¹⁸¹

By following the style of discourse by the Daoist classics, which does not avoid paradoxes, it can be stated that the leaders whose only concern is the ruling of a country are bad leaders. What should be of greater concern than governing the country is their own relationship with Dao and the practice of their moral and mystical life. Only then will they be capable of governing their country appropriately and successfully.

Conclusion

The Daoist classics talk about mysticism first and foremost as the lifestyle of a sage. Rulers are also obligated to become sages, because the quality of their rule destines the fates of other people. Do the Daoist classics consciously limit themselves to sages and rulers alone? The reality of life testifies that sages are always a minority in society. Some of the places in the texts of Laozi actually present a sage as an entirely lonely person. In any case, it would be naive to expect that searching for wisdom would become popular in society. Nonetheless, there is no apparent basis for claiming that the Daoist classics would have narrowed their circle of followers consciously and artificially. A sage does not represent some special class of people but rather each person who yearns to live a life of wisdom and harmony.

In Christianity mysticism closely associates with theological love. In classical Daoism, despite its expansion of mysticism, the topic of love is lacking. Nevertheless, respect for nature and for people is very much pronounced here. It would be absolutely unacceptable to a Daoist sage to harm the harmony in nature or hurt another person. The entire wisdom of Daoism is abundant with subtle attention to others.

An analysis of the mystical aspects of Daoist teaching reveals the elements of this rich doctrine born in ancient China. Some of these elements, albeit, their remaining unique to the culture of Chinese thought, seem to be related to Christian doctrine and the Christian worldview at the same time. Ancient Chinese sages grasped numerous, important factors about human existence and had the ability to explain about them in their writings. These texts, which have survived to our days, were guideposts of life and an inspiration for many generations of humankind. Naturally, over the course of history, they have received various and not only one-sided interpretations. Regardless, today, and especially when looking at them from the Christian perspective, we can find many ideas in the works of the Daoist classics that are “Christian” in their deepest sense. Daoist mysticism does not speak about salvation and a vocation to holiness like Christianity does, but it does extend an invitation for a wise and kenotic lifestyle. Kenotic wisdom maximally approaches what the New Testament refers to

¹⁷⁹ *Laozi*, 20. Translation by Sanderson Beck.

¹⁸⁰ *Wenzi*, 75.

¹⁸¹ Cf. *Wenzi*, 75.

as the following of Christ: “This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2: 21).

A mystical component of human life becomes pronounced in Daoist texts as an imperative that cannot be changed by anything. Authentic mystical experience is not only important to a person of any profession but also essential for that person to be able to perform his/her duties appropriately. It cannot be denied that Daoist sages were critical of social activity that arises from a narrow sense of duty or that harms the harmony of the universe. On the contrary, activity that is based on knowing Dao and has a mature mystical experience, flows naturally into the harmonious process of the world’s evolvment and fosters progress.