

Comparing and Contrasting Taoism with Christianity

The Ideal Life

Taoism and Christianity conceive the ideal life in distinctly different ways. For a Taoist, the ideal life is to live in harmony with the Tao, the great Way of nature. Taoists understand this to be something human beings can achieve on our own. Christians, by contrast, believe the ideal life is found in living in accord with the will of God. Doing so is believed to require God's help in the form of grace.

These two religious traditions have different ways of expressing why people fail to live the life they should. Taoism notes that we humans have the ability to think and have clearly accomplished much by using this ability, but it comes with a down side. We can think our way into deviating from the Way of the Tao. Our thinking draws us away from the naturalness that is the Taoist ideal. Christians understand deviation from the life God intends people to live in terms of sinfulness and disobedience to God's will.

Jesus and Lao Tzu

The founders of these two paths have both pronounced differences and interesting similarities. As we have seen with other Asian religions, Lao Tzu is understood by his followers to be a human being without any divinity. It isn't even completely clear that Lao Tzu really existed; he may be a figure of legend only. Christianity holds that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine and, although not all the details of Jesus' earthly life are clear or undisputed, it is accepted that Jesus was a historical person.

The interesting similarity is that both have birth narratives that include extraordinary elements. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin who was without sin. Lao Tzu is said to have been conceived by a shooting star and was already over eighty years old at his birth.

The Bible and the *Tao Te Ching*

There are striking differences in the sacred writings of these two religions. The Scriptures of Christianity, incorporating those of its predecessor, Judaism, consist of several different literary formats. Together they tell a story, relating details of the life of the Israelites; Jesus' life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension; the founding of the Christian Church; and some of the Church's early struggles. They show how Christianity evolved out of its Hebrew roots. The *Tao Te Ching* is a small book of less than one hundred short sayings, poems, and aphorisms. It gives us no consistent narrative nor does it provide any information about the early years of the Taoist movement.

There is at least one slight similarity amid all this contrast. Many of the statements in the *Tao Te Ching* are paradoxical and must be approached more through intuition than through logical analysis. Jesus' parables are similar, in that they show people acting in ways that at first seem illogical (think of the father of the Prodigal Son, for example). Approached in faith, they reveal a deeper truth.



Relative and Absolute Values

Taoists believe that all values are relative. Any given moral or aesthetic value, for example, has meaning only in relation to its opposite. We could not comprehend beauty without ugliness, nor could we appreciate the value of nonviolence without also understanding violence. Taoism insists that true harmony, a true balance that reflects how the universe is a constant interplay of yang and yin, requires the existence of both what we commonly label as “good” and “bad.” Most Christians, on the other hand, embrace the existence of at least some absolute moral values. The existence of evil, rather than being a part of a larger, perfect harmony, is evidence of human sinfulness—of something that has gone wrong with God’s creation.

