

Essay on Tao (Dao)

By Rev. Fr. Robert Herald, 29 April 1994

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Is it possible to see and realize the essence of Jesus Christ and His message through the Chinese ideal of Tao? The word TAO / DAO simply means the WAY and was used in early Chinese texts for the “way of heaven” to signify the norm of right conduct. My understanding of the Tao means that it is the principle which governs the universe. It is the beginning and end of all things, at once transcendent and immanent, sustaining and directing all things by its inherent power and yet so utterly beyond them that it cannot be properly named.

It is, for example, something like the term YAHWEH for the Hebrews – a term so holy, divine, mystical that the name itself could not be described or even written into language.

It is, for example, similar to the Greek concept of SOPHIA or Wisdom. In this realm God was in the beginning; God always was; God contains within itself the principles of all things, while at the same time it pervades all things and leads them to their end.

Let me use, for example, the famous prologue to St. John’s Gospel to demonstrate my point. If Jesus had appeared in the Far East instead of the Middle East; to the Chinese instead of a Greco-Roman world, would it be possible to understand Jesus in this manner.

“In the beginning was the Tao (Dao), and the Tao was with God and the Tao was God.” Here I am substituting Chinese philosophy for the Greek philosophy originally used by the gospel written by John to present Christianity to the Gentiles. John took a Hellenistic concept SOPHIA and brought it into Christian revelation.

As a Catholic priest, I am acutely aware of the over 4 billion people in the world who are not Christian. Christianity must be aware of their relationship to these non-Christian religions which predominate on a 4 to 1 ratio.

In this concept of the Tao, we have a most profound insight; that is, the revelation of Christ comes from the Tao. The LOGOS or WORD that St. John described in his gospel is a divine principle of Reason governing the universe. A knowledge of this principle, the Tao, is inscribed in the hearts of all people. There are traces and elements of Tao in all religions. In conclusion, Christianity has never been successful in converting Asians (Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians) because it had never understood the principle of the Tao as in Buddhism or Yoga and the Vedanta as in Hinduism. Christianity, particularly Catholicism, must have a deep respect for the truth which is to be found in the Tao. In order to truly understand the mission and saving work of Jesus, it is necessary to explore the realm of the Tao.