

Life, Death and Immortality: the Taoist Religion in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith

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Abstract

This article outlines the main features of Taoist religious practices in Singapore and makes a preliminary comparison of two religions, which at first glance, could not be more disparate, namely the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith. The article seeks to determine whether some sort of unity may be found beneath the apparent dichotomy between these two and whether and in what way the gulf between these two distinct religions from different times and origins, may somehow be spanned.

Introduction

After my mother's miraculous recovery from a serious illness with help from a Christian doctor, both my parents indicated their conversion to Christianity by physically disposing of all the "idols" which had graced their family home. As a child, I was therefore deprived of the direct influence of the religion of my ancestors. However, I remember vividly the ancestral home of my uncle, the eldest brother of my father, who lived across the road. The influence of religion on tradition was visible everywhere. Upon entering the house, one saw paper gods both on portrait and character form posted on the doors for protection against possible invasion by evil spirits*. Near the door and on the floor was an altar to *Ta-po-kung*, the local God of the soil, who brought luck and virtue to the

family¹ and protected the family against destructive influences. In the courtyard was the Heavenly official, *T'ien Kuan* while the wealth gods, whose job was to bring prosperity to the family were in the main sitting room of the house. Of course, there was *Tsao-shen*, the kitchen God in the kitchen, whose duty it was to make an annual report to the Jade Emperor, the "supreme God" in Heaven regarding the conduct and behaviour of the family and its members. On festival days and during times of birth, marriage or death, there were even more religious activities in front of the altars in the home, in temples and on the streets, and on such occasions an atmosphere of awesome sacredness and reverence was pervasive.

My uncle has since passed away and the house sold, resold, and torn down to make way for urban renewal, as has been the fate of many old houses in Singapore since the 1960's. Nevertheless, as an adult, I remain enthralled by ceremonies, rituals and things religious. In this article, I would like to make a preliminary comparison of two religions, which on first glance, could not have been more divergent -- the Taoist religion as popularly practised in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith. My quest is to discover whether some common denominators exist beneath the surface contradictions of these two Faiths separated by millennia and vast distances and demonstrate how such common denominators could be fashioned into instruments of understanding linking the Taoist and Bahá'í Faiths.

A few salient points must first be noted about the Taoist religion. First and foremost, the Taoist *religion* is very different from the Taoist *philosophy*. The latter is represented by the philosophies of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, documented in the texts ascribed to them, namely the *Tao-te-ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* as well as the later materials such as the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. The Taoist religion, on the other hand, can be traced to Chang Tao-ling (circa 2nd Century CE) who claimed that he had a vision whereby Lao-tzu gave him the authority to organise religious communities, to forgive faults and sins, to heal and most important, to exorcise ghosts, demons and evil spirits. Over the centuries, many different schools of Taoism arose, built on Chang's vision, and drawing

¹ Sometimes called *lao-yeh* (the lord), *tu-ti-yeh* (the lord of the soil) or *lao-po-kung* (the elderly po-kung) according to different dialect groups.

inspiration, imagery, and eventually even gods from the original philosophy of Lao-tzu. Taoism began to focus on revelations, healing, rituals, oracles and shamanistic practices, developed monasteries inspired by Buddhism, and established a network of temples throughout China. Understandably, these two strands – *religious* Taoism and *philosophical* Taoism -- gave rise to much perplexity by outside observers, one being a sophisticated philosophy and the other interwoven with elaborate rituals and fantastic visions of countless gods.

The second noteworthy point is that where the masses of poor Chinese immigrants to Singapore in the 19th century and early 20th Century were concerned, they were not from the professional or educated elites (who would have been more attracted to philosophical Taoism or Confucianism); rather they were the “Chinese masses” from the lower and middle working classes,² and were therefore more attuned to religious Taoism. These people were my ancestors on both sides of my family and while the more sophisticated Chinese may not be particularly proud of the heterogeneous practices of the masses, it would be difficult for them to deny that it contains much that is meaningful in the culture of the masses of immigrants. In Singapore, while there may be a handful of small establishments where *philosophical* Taoism is practised; it is in its popular or religious form that Taoism has a strong hold upon the religious thought and practices of the people.

Third, it must be realised that the Taoist religion is a major part of what one may call “the Chinese religion”.³ In Singapore, this term is taken to mean a characteristic amalgam of religious Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, a dash of Confucianism and a great deal of spirit-mediumship.⁴ It is a “Chinese religion” and one which is eclectic and polytheistic in nature. As the popular saying goes: “The average Chinese

² Heinze, Ruth-Inge. “The Dynamics of Chinese Religion. A Recent Case study of Spirit Possession in Singapore.” In Cheu, Hock Tong, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*. Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications Sdn. Bhd., 1993.

³ See Chew, Phyllis Ghim-Lian, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá’í Faith*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1993.

⁴ Clammer, J. “Religious Pluralism and Chinese Beliefs in Singapore”, In Cheu, Hock Tong, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

wears a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals." In other words, a Chinese can claim that he is both a Taoist (a lover of nature), a Confucianist (who is serious about his duties), and a Buddhist (deeply aware of the transience of life) at the same time. This kind of practical wisdom is illustrated in folk temples not just in Singapore but in the thriving Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong where statues of Confucius, Lao-tzu and Buddha are set up alongside those of traditional Chinese immortals as objects of veneration.⁵

Finally, it must be noted that while the religion of the Chinese in Singapore has always been identified with Buddhism, "Buddhism" is found to be used as a convenient religious label where in fact a large number of those who claim to be Buddhists, are actually practitioners of the Chinese religion.⁶ Similarly, the Taoist influence is strongly visible in most Singapore temples, even though these temples may be reputed to be Buddhist ones.⁷ The 1990 Singapore census reports that among the Singapore Chinese population, 68% are Taoist/Buddhist, 13% Christians and 14% with no religion and 5% of other religions.⁸ The most prevalent form of the Chinese syncretic religion is said to be *Shén Jiào*, ("Doctrine of the gods"). *Shén* means "spirit" - and this refers to the worship of the spirit of some deified hero or emperor. In this article, the terms *shénism* and Taoism can therefore be used interchangeably.

⁵ Actually, the Chinese religion is even more complex than this simple trilogy. A recent survey found that besides Taoism and Confucianism, there were seven schools of Buddhism (including Mahayana, Theravada, Pure Land, *Ch'an* and the Japanese Nichiren school), at least nine syncretic religions (including the Great Way of Former Heaven, the *P'u T'u Men* or salvation sect, the *Kuei Ken Men* or way-of reverting-to-the-first-principle sect, and the well known Red Swastika Society and many spirit-medium cults, pure Chinese ones, Sino-Malay ones and Sino-Indian ones. Most of these were operating from small shop-front temples or shop-houses and even apartments.

⁶ This is because the Chinese hold canonical Buddhism in high regard because of its strict doctrines and principles. See Tong, Chee Kiong, *Trends in Traditional Chinese Religion in Singapore*. A Report prepared for the Ministry of Community Development, Singapore, 1988.

⁷ See Elliott, Alan J. A. *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore*. London School of Economics. London: the Athlone Press, 1955, Reprinted 1990.

⁸ *Census of Population. Advance Data Release*. Singapore: Dept. of Statistics. 1990.

It is time now to look at how *one* aspect of Taoism – *religious* Taoism -- is manifested in Singapore. While Taoism is, by self-definition, a way that does not cling to words or comparison, it is nevertheless one of the ways to unlock and understand the psyche of the Chinese population in Singapore. It can be described initially from three perspectives: its ritual rites, its spiritual functionaries, and through a popular local festival - that of the Nine Emperor gods.

The Taoist Religion in Singapore -- Coping with Life, Death and Immortality

Religious Taoism is essentially preoccupied with basic concerns, such as life, death, and immortality, and pragmatic issues relating to health, wealth, business and marriage. To ensure the wellbeing of such concerns, it was believed that the regular performance of rituals would placate the spirit world and enable one to lead a long, healthy and wealthy life free from unnecessary misfortunes. There was also the belief that the performance of good deeds would help in the cleansing of one's body, that physical illness was a consequence of immoral conduct; and that any cure would therefore require repentance and good work. Good health and long life could also be achieved through the ancient shamanistic arts of external alchemy (elixir) or internal alchemy (meditation and exercises).

Taoist Ritual Rites

For the religious Taoist, maintaining harmony with the environment is important and this is accomplished through the performance of highly complex rites involving symbolism, music and drama, all of which contribute to the articulation of the sacred mysteries. In these ceremonies, the first thing that strikes an observer is perhaps the ubiquitous presence of icons and symbols. Images of the deities are represented in statutes, paper figures, portraits, banners and draperies. Accompanying these images are auspicious signs, cosmological symbols such as dragons, divine beings, and the diagram of the "great ultimate", a symbol of the Taoist cosmos. Music accompanies these ritual performances by signalling the different stages in the ritual. The music is urgent when

military action is undertaken against demons; it changes to a sombre note when the officials approach the noble deities.⁹

Taoist rituals can be divided into two categories - one for the benefit of the living and one for that of the dead.¹⁰ Both are complementary in the sense that unless the dead are kept content, according to traditional Chinese beliefs, lasting peace and prosperity for the living would not be possible. The first, rituals for the living, are large-scale communal thanksgiving celebrations marking either the anniversary of a patron deity of a community or commemorating an important event such as the completion of a new temple. On such occasions, the Taoist priest conveys the gratitude of the community to the gods and invites them to come and partake of the many ostentatious offerings laid on the altars and tables. There are also street processions, feasting and theatrical performances. Such occasions help bring the community together.

Like the living, the dead also demand close attention. If properly cared for, the dead would become caring ancestors and a source of help and blessings; if neglected, they could turn into malignant spirits. It is thus in the interest of the descendants to have the necessary rituals performed for the repose of the dead. The services of a Taoist priest is employed as he is believed to be able to pacify the soul of the deceased by guiding it, step by step, first to the subterranean world, then through the courts of judgement, and finally to the paradise of the blessed.

Like the ancient Hebrews, the ancient Chinese had a three-tiered world view, of heaven above, the dead below, and earth, the abode of the living,

⁹ It is possible that Chinese theatre had evolved from ritual performance. Taoist rituals are dramatic expressive, and at times even comical. For example, the purification rite that forms part of the creation of the ritual altar in a thanksgiving offering unfolds as a playlet, in which the Taoist priest chases and eventually subdues a masked acolyte impersonating a demon. The sessions called "Despatching the Writ of pardon" and "Attack on Hell" include lively dialogues, jest and acrobatics. These light-hearted and motion filled moments are akin to popular drama. The language is concrete and narrative rather than abstract or bureaucratic. The plot and roles are closely parallel to those of popular theatre and easily grasped by the audience. See Lee, C.Y., Chan, K. L. and Tsu, Y.H. *Taoism. Outlines of a Chinese Religious Tradition*. Singapore: Taoist Federation of Singapore, 1994.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*

in between. They believed that at death the upper soul (*hun*) rises up to heaven while the lower soul (*p'o*) descends to earth. The ancestors were often represented as somewhere "on high" with the Lord, and continued to have power over the living, whether to protect or bless them or to punish and curse them. Ancient Chinese literature, especially that of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., is fairly rich in essays and poems devoted to recalling the soul. The soul is called *hun-p'o*. *P'o* is the spirit of man's physical nature expressed in his body and his physical movement while *hun-p'o* survives him at death. When my father passed away, my mother would still expect his soul to return to the home at certain times of the year and the entire family would faithfully gather together with huge offerings of food and small rituals of reverence to observe his return. Where the masses was concerned, there was no question that the individual continued to live after death.¹¹

Spiritual Functionaries

A distinctive feature of the Taoist religion is its extravagance which is manifested in innumerable spiritual beings, gods or celestials and immortals as well as deified heroes and forces of nature, all of whom are empowered to intervene in human affairs. Resembling in its functions the imperial Chinese state bureaucracy, they make up a highly sophisticated structured pantheon. According to Taoist theology, the divine government is headed by a triumvirate known as the "three pure ones" (*Sanqing*), all three of which emanate directly from the Tao.¹² The highest of the three is generally agreed to be "Celestial Venerable of the Original beginning" (*Yuanshi Tianzun*), the embodiment the supreme creator of all things. The second is to the left of the supreme pure one "Celestial Venerable of the Luminous Treasure" (*Lingbao Tianzun*) and is depicted as holding the famous Taoist "diagram of the supreme ultimate" (*taiji tu*). The one on the right is the "most high lord Lao", another formal representation of the "divine" Lao-tzu.

¹¹ See Ching, Julia. *Chinese Religions*. London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1993.

¹² In a typical Taoist temple, these three deities would sit in the "Hall of the Three Pure Ones" (*Sanqing dian*).

However, while there may be thousands of deities, in actual worship, only a few popular ones stand out because they are perceived to be more merciful and have a special regard for the people. One of the most influential is *Tianhou*, the "Empress of Heaven"¹³. Another is *Dabogong*, the earth deity who presides over a wide range of affairs including health, wealth and general safekeeping.¹⁴ Another popular personage is *Guandi*, (Lord Guan) known as *Guangong*, (the "God of War"), a famous warrior in early China whose heroic deeds have been immortalised in the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.¹⁵ One must not forget too the widely celebrated eight immortals (*xian*) who while occupying a low category in the divine hierarchy are very appealing to the masses due to the fact that they have a special affinity for the problems of daily life, since they were all human beings at one time.

An important functionary on the physical plane who is able to help the individual make communication with the divinities in the spirit world is the spirit-medium, who would frequently call on a personal spirit to come down and enlighten him or her. If one desires to speak urgently to one's departed ancestor, one would seek the help of a medium who would be able to relay messages to and from the departed ancestors while in a trance. Another service which the medium provides is the performance of ritual healing for illnesses or problems such as spirit possession, the loss of the soul by witchcraft and ailments caused by natural elements. The standard cure for the first two is essentially to exorcise the evil spirits responsible, while the treatment for the disharmony of natural elements is based on the prescription of herbal medicine. Both categories, however, entail a lavish use of *fu* (charms) which include amulets, talismans, and prayer charms.

¹³ *Tianhou* was born into a seafarer's family with the name of Lin, and blessed with special spiritual powers which she used to help her family and others. In particular, she is well remembered for having saved her brothers who were caught in a storm at sea, by going out to them in spirit and guiding them to safety. Eventually her divinity was recognised and temples built in her honour.

¹⁴ This name refers to the elder brother of one's grandfather or "granduncle". Although occupying a relatively minor place in the divine hierarchy, this deity is very popular.

¹⁵ Because of his courage, loyalty and moral integrity, he serves as the patron saint of policeman, gangsters and secret societies.

The Festival of the Nine Emperor gods

An example of a popular festival observed in Singapore and Malaysia, where all the pomp and circumstance of the Taoist religion may be observed is that of the Nine Emperor gods. While there are many versions recounting the origin of this festival, the Singapore version has it that these are the nine divine brothers in charge of life, death, health, disease, happiness, fortune, prosperity, wealth and longevity. The festival gets under way on the last day (18th or 19th) of the eighth Moon. This festival may be said to be proto-typically "taoist" or "shénistic" in the sense that one sees the central concerns of the faithful, namely, the veneration of life, the need for protection against evil spirits, and the pursuit for a long, peaceful, healthy and wealthy life.

The display of these sentiments is clearly represented in the myth, ritual and symbol which form the dominant pillars of the Nine Emperor God Festival.¹⁶ The start of the festival is signified by the erection of a *gaodeng* (tall lamp) to the left of the temple-square. Here, a consecration ritual is performed to purify the temple ground, and the spirit soldier of heaven, earth, and water and fire are released and deployed. Actual celebrations begin with the staging of an Amoy opera on the first day of the Ninth Moon and reach a climax on the ninth day, with a *Koujun* (special feasts to the spirit soldiers and the laity) on the third, sixth and ninth days. The end of the celebration -- on the tenth day -- is marked by the lowering of the tall lamp and the recalling of the spirit soldiers from their respective posts.

The festival also sees street processions, starting from the temple, led by two disciples carrying one half of the Eight Trigrams flag and others with musical instruments. During the festival devotees have to offer tea, fruits, flowers, and money and sacrifice of joss-sticks and white candles, burning of incense paper, paper images, charm papers and others. Here, a trance dance and trance rituals are performed by spirit mediums. While in spirit-mediumship, the spirit deity conveys a message that is comprehensible and translatable; in spirit possession, the spirit does not convey any message. The trance dance and rituals are performed in the streets and

¹⁶ See Cheu, *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

vicinity of the temple and are supposed to purify the environment. When the lion in the lion dance exhales, for instance, its breath is believed to repel *yin* forces and when it inhales, it is believed to draw in *yang* forces from the surrounding area. By so doing, the lion attracts *yang* and repels *yin*, thereby insuring harmony in the environment. The same effect is also produced by the fireball or spiked-ball display. In this display, spirit-mediums would either kick the red-hot iron ball, or swing a spiked-ball around. This kicking and swinging actions are supposed to enact the incandescent state of the primal universe to produce the five elements - fire, wood, water, earth and metal. The underlying significance here is to ensure the equilibrium of the universe in which humans live.

Having discussed the essential features of popular Taoism or Shénism as it is practised in Singapore, I will now compare it with the Bahá'í Faith; firstly, in terms of their spiritual/theological principles and secondly, their social orientation.

Comparing Spiritual and Theological Principles

First, it must be pointed out that there are certain features of Taoism which are strikingly in harmony with the Bahá'í Faith. Both the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith believe that the great religions originate from the same source, and that in reality, there are no differences between their persons, words, messages, acts, and manners.¹⁷ This feature also explains why, historically, Taoism was able to assimilate and accommodate aspects of shamanism, Confucianism and Buddhism over the years. The Bahá'í Faith is also as inclusive in spirit as Taoism in the sense that there is a stress on the removal of religious prejudices and the establishment of a spirit of valuation and recognition of other religions that far transcends mutual tolerance. However, Bahá'ís would go one step further by advancing the concept of *progressive revelation* - that is, that the God or

¹⁷ This idea can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the same river may start off at different points and time, bearing different names, but the supply of water content that each receives from its sources does not vary. It is the water rather than the name of the tributaries that serve a purpose for humanity.

Supreme Ultimate sends various prophets at different times in history bearing both a spiritual and social message.

There are other threads of connection. As a salvation religion, Taoism gives special importance to a Messiah figure who would usher in an epoch of Great Peace. This is found especially in the *T'ai-p'ing chng* (Classic of the Great Peace). Although incomplete and partially restored (7th century AD), it is sometimes regarded as the most important text after the *Tao-te ching*. It offers a doctrine of salvation, with a saviour or "divine man", in possession of a "celestial book", who teaches the return of ideal government while awaiting the arrival in the fullness of time of the Great Peace.¹⁸ Bahá'ís believe that the advent of Bahá'u'lláh is the fulfilment of this prophesy as well as other similar prophecies in other Holy Scriptures.¹⁹ They believe that Bahá'u'lláh is the "Great One" predicted in various scriptures, including the Taoist scripture, Who will usher in a period of Great Peace unique in human history and Who is destined to fulfil the prophecies of the Founders of earlier religions.²⁰

Certainly, like all great religions which have stood the test of time, Taoism has contributed towards the pool of not only the spiritual but also the material knowledge of humankind, for example, the development of such sciences as chemistry, mineralogy, and geography in China can be traced to Taoism.²¹ Furthermore, Taoism has also helped to regulate the moral life and unlock human potential. As a religion, it has

¹⁸ Also, according to Taoist belief, Lao-tzu has the power to appear in other times and places as well as the personification of the Tao. In this regard, a number of Taoist scriptures are devoted to the numerous transformation of Lao-tzu - the number is usually 81 (9 x 9) because of its perceived magical significance. See also Ching, J. *Chinese Religions and Practices in Southeast Asia*.

¹⁹ See Bible, Isaiah xi: 1, ii:4, xxxv:1-2; Matthew xxiv:14, 26-27, vii:15-20; Koran xxi:104, ii:206, xxxix:67-71; Bhagavad Gita: Fourth Discourse, Digha Nikaya III: 75-76; Dinkird (23).

²⁰ Many Chinese have dreamt of the Great Peace. Towards the middle of the 2nd Century, a master, Chang Chüeh, had a revelation that the advent of the Great Peace (t'a'-ping), which should be the commencement of the earthly paradise, would come with special signs. See Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*.

²¹ See Needham, J. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956.

characteristically emphasised the importance of good deeds and the accumulation of merit. In its unique way, it taught that to become a "celestial immortal", the highest grade of immortals, one needed to perform at least thirteen hundred good deeds; to become a lower grade immortal, no less than three hundred were deemed necessary. Later, when the genre of Taoist writings known as "ledgers of merit and demerit" gained currency, the moral teachings of Taoism become even more widespread. Essentially, this type of religious practice resembles an account book in which daily actions are classified as good and bad deeds, each of which is assigned a fixed number of merit or demerit points in late imperial China.²² Like all the other world religions, the Bahá'í Faith also has a great deal of ethical teachings focusing on virtues such as unity, justice, love, truthfulness, trustworthiness, detachment, humility, reverence, courtesy and kindness, although not always classifiable or accountable in such strict material terms as "merit" and "demerit" points.

There are of course as many differences as there are similarities. Although God is the one unnameable, invisible, the mother of all things in philosophical Taoism, there is in religious Taoism, the existence of the pantheon of gods and spirits in the Taoist religion, most of whom have anthropomorphic names, human characteristics and memorable faces. Here the Bahá'í Faith is more akin to philosophical Taoism since it declares that nothing can describe or give form to "the Absolute";²³ its scripture emphatically asserts that "He is indeed a true believer in the unity of God, who, in this Day will regard Him as One immeasurably exalted above all comparisons and likenesses with which men have compared Him."²⁴ For the Chinese peasants however, spirits and ghosts were regarded as secondary sources of life and were worshipped and

²² Another type of Taoist writings known as "morality books" became extremely popular. These aimed at promoting good deeds and subscribed to the six moral teachings adopted by the government, that is, filial piety, respect for age and authority, harmony with neighbours and friends and moral instruction for one's descendant especially proper conduct and avoiding improper behaviour.

²³ Philosophical Taoism with the portrayal of "the way" as absolute and transcendent, is closer in spirit to the Bahá'í Faith. See Chew, Phyllis Ghim Lian, "The Great Tao", *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 4, 2, 1991.

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 3rd edn. 1976, p 337

thanked for their benevolence. As maintainers of life on earth, the spirits of rivers, trees and mountains were also venerated.

It must be noted that while there may be countless gods and goddesses in the Taoist pantheon, in principle, they are all under the command of a sovereign high God and have their specific station in the divine hierarchy. In other words, while polytheism is the popular image of Taoism, it is actually monotheism which underlies the religious attitude of the Chinese. A practical reason also accounts for Taoism polytheistic exterior. For a religion catering to the needs of a much earlier era, the "unknowable" and remote Tao as expounded in the *Tao-te ching* of Lao-tzu did not offer much consolation to the primitive mind. An anthropomorphic pantheon of gods therefore evolved through time to allow devotees to turn to more approachable deities who may be of inferior rank but nevertheless able to dispense blessings or intercede on their behalf.

It is intellectually difficult for agrarian people of an earlier age to be comfortable with an absolutely transcendental God, Who, by His own Will created a spatio-temporal universe within the framework of contingency. Popular Taoism therefore conceived the Supreme Ultimate as a kind of immanent transcendental being.²⁵ This immanence is often expressed emphatically by the immanent universal love and union of Earth and Heaven. This concept of cosmic union involves the idea of the one and single God immanent in everything.²⁶ The love of Heaven is united with that of Earth and everything that is in it. Here, Heaven is perceived as "giving" and Earth as "receiving". Giving belongs to the sphere of centripetal power *yang*; receiving is within the sphere of centrifugal power *yin*. The confluence of the two powers, like a symphony of love, produces an infinite variety of form and colour of lives.

²⁵ This attribution of transcendence to Tao however is challenged by those who inspired by the writings of philosopher A. N. Whitehead, consider Taoism to be a kind of process philosophy. They consider Tao to be immanent, the sum total of being and non-being.

²⁶ See Peerenboom, R. P. "Cosmogony, the Taoist Way." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 17, 1990, p 157-174.

While the expression of this dual force takes on a very Chinese colouring, it should be noted that the Bahá'í scriptures, interestingly enough, also acknowledge these two forces.²⁷ However, the Bahá'í Faith's version of immanence is slightly different. It expounds that in a sense, the whole of creation is infused with the "presence" of the Creator. However, while causality is indeed the universal law, yet the effect is not the Cause (in this instance" the Creator"). Hence the Bahá'í Faith distinguishes "immanence" (presence) from "identity" (essence). While adherents of religious Taoism believe that they can merge with God or become God while in a trance, Bahá'ís view this claim as misguided since it would again mean merging the cause with the effect. Here, *philosophical* Taoism is more in harmony with the Bahá'í Faith since it stresses the transcendence of Tao. The distinction between *essence* and *presence* is clearly emphasised in the Bahá'í Faith: "How can I claim to have known Thee when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy Mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy Truth?"²⁸ In other words, while the Creation is infused with the Creator's presence, the Creation is not synonymous with the Creator.

Again, while both Taoist and Bahá'í generally concur that the status of the departed spirit can be either promoted or degraded, and that progress in the spiritual world is influenced by the intercession of others through prayers and good works done on earth in the name of the departed, yet there the similarity ends. This is because popular Taoism has elevated the practice of this principle to the status of "ancestor worship", where death ceremonies and anniversaries of ancestors become elaborate and costly

²⁷ Consider the following quotation from the Bahá'í scriptures: "They have said that the potentialities (*qabiliyyat*) and the recipients of the potentialities (*maqbulat*) came into being and were created simultaneously. For example, it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the "Fashioner" (*qabil*) and the "Fashioned" (*maqbul*). By "Fashioned" is meant substance (*madda*) and primary matter (*huyula*), and by Fashioner is meant form and shape, which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form." (*Makatib* 2:35) A provisional translation by Moojan Momen in *Bahai Studies Bulletin* 3.4.26-27.

²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976 p. 63.

ritualistic affairs. Thus, while the motive is shared -- gratitude towards parents and grandparents for the gift of life -- its expression is not. Religious Taoism has made ancestor worship into a fine art; for the Bahá'í, simplicity and sincerity is the keynote, that is, it is the intention rather than the form which is valued and emphasised.

Another disparity is that while there are many different Taoist sects rivalling one another for supremacy and orthodox status, the Bahá'í Faith has remained united in creed and practice throughout the world. While this fact is often explained away by referring to the age difference --- the Bahá'í Faith is only approximately 150 years old in comparison to more than 2,000 years of Taoism, yet this is not the most important reason. The unity of the Bahá'í community is predicated upon clear and detailed instructions for the organisation of Bahá'í society, which exist within its sacred text. There is no provision for clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Explicit instructions concerning succession is also given. Bahá'u'lláh clearly named a successor in His Last Will and Testament, also known as the *Book of the Covenant*. This written covenant is unique among the world's major religions²⁹, and has safeguarded the Bahá'í Faith against division or the rise of individual leadership in the governing of the Bahá'í community, despite it having spread to every nook and cranny of the planet within its short history of 150 years. Of course, in the case of Taoism, the process of succession is not an issue since the foremost proclaimer of the "Tao", Lao Tzu (an anonymous term meaning "old man") did not claim to be a prophet. As Chew (1993) has noted, while the Bahá'í Faith is a religion in the conventional sense, with a prophet and a revelation; the Chinese religion in which Taoism plays a major part, is "a religion without revelation".³⁰ Since there is no dogma based on divine revelation, or a church as guardian of unchangeable dogmatic truth, everyone is free to believe anything he or she chooses. The Taoist official of a particular region may be loosely connected, have a regular job and

²⁹ Jesus obliquely indicated the primacy of Peter, but the comment recorded leaves room for doubt about its significance. Nor was the guidance given by Muhammad about His successor enough to prevent Islam splitting into many sects, each recognising a different line of succession after Muhammad.

³⁰ It is possible that the timelessness of the *Tao-te ching* is due to the inspiration received from an earlier revelation in China's history. See Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*. pp. 49-51.

put on priestly vestment only when the occasion arises. In such a situation, it was not surprising to find great regional variation in the practice of Taoism. Taoism has, for example, no precise membership requirements, a point of divergence with not only the Bahá'í Faith but the other major religions, where a believer is defined a little more stringently, usually by a set of doctrines and practices. Bahá'ís define their members as those who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh as the messenger of God for this age, and this often requires that the member sign a declaration card to that effect for administrative purposes, including also the electoral roll for the annual election of their governing bodies.

Possessing multifarious ceremonies and rituals, religious Taoism is also at variance with the Bahá'í Faith. In popular Taoism, ritualistic practices tend to take the centerstage and often the intention behind the ritual is forgotten; in the Bahá'í Faith, deeds are stressed over rituals, as they are in the high moral and ethical teachings described by Lao-tzu. For Bahá'ís, a good life does not comprise so much the performance of rituals, but of praiseworthy moral conduct and righteous deeds to their fellow human beings. Indeed, the Bahá'í scripture points out that "one hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship."³¹ For the Bahá'í, religion is more than just a system of teaching, commandments, prohibitions, rites and customs; it is in fact a living, active and transforming force. It must be acknowledged, however, that popular Taoist rituals serve a function since they enable their observers to fill their lives with a significance which they would not otherwise have. Community thanksgiving celebrations, for example, offer a helpful avenue to reassert good will and harmony among the members of the community. The engagement of a ritual often fills the empty spaces in the lives of the adherents and gives them a connection to the past, providing a satisfactory answer to most, if not all, of the major questions and quests for life. The difference between religious Taoism and the Bahá'í Faith lies centrally in the degree of how much priority *form* should have over *essence*.

The belief in evil forces, the personification of demons in the Taoist religion, and the elaborate measures to exorcise them through spirit-

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-I-Iqan. The Book of Certitude*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975.

mediums is also at distinct variance with the relatively more "scientific" Bahá'í Faith, since Bahá'u'lláh taught that evil has no intrinsic existence as a separate entity. In the Bahá'í scriptures, darkness is described as the absence of light, hence evil is the absence of good in the same way as ignorance is the lack of knowledge and hatred the lack of love. Nevertheless, and in all fairness to Taoism, we must remember that religious Taoism emerged at a time when the masses were credulous and mostly uneducated people with no scientific knowledge. If one can see popular Taoism or shénism as the religion of man's childhood and a solace to his innermost apprehensions, one may understand that humanity's spiritual fears and aspirations has always been intrinsically similar, only that the expression in man's childhood tends to take on more personified and concrete forms.

Comparing Social Principles

While the *spiritual/theological* teachings of all religions are basically similar in terms of their collective belief in an ultimate goal or Being, the existence of an afterlife and the necessity of good deeds in the material world of existence, each of them also contain *social* laws such as those pertaining to food, marriage, etc. which are peculiar to them alone. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that each religious personage, from Zoroaster, Buddha etc., on to Bahá'u'lláh has appeared at different times and in different places, and thus given laws and ordinances befitting the needs of the particular time of their appearance.

While the essential spiritual core of religion remains as it always has been, the evolving aspect concerns the socio-political conditions which require new laws to fit the different requirements that change from age to age. Every body of belief, whether religious or secular, has a vision and ideal. For example, Marx proposes the ideal of an egalitarian society where there are no classes and no exploitation, and where each individual receives benefits according to his true needs. Confucianism finds supreme harmony in a disciplined and ordered human relationship. Buddhism perceives all reality as interdependent and teaches man to achieve union with it through rejection of the drives and desires of a separate ego. Taoism finds harmony in nature and naturalness and dreams of

immortality beyond life on earth. For the Bahá'í the essential goal is to achieve a vision that is world-embracing and one which would lead to the unity of mankind and the establishment of a world civilisation based on peace and justice.

If there is a major difference between religious Taoism and the Bahá'í Faith, it lies centrally in the area of social rather than spiritual principles. Appearing in the mid- 19th Century, the Bahá'í Faith brings with it distinctive social laws which are necessarily absent in the Taoist framework. For the first time in history, a religion has explicitly stated that humanity can and must create an international federation capable of co-ordinating the use of the earth's resources and solving the problems facing the entire planet. A high priority is given in the Bahá'í Faith to the just resolution of regional and international conflicts. Efforts are made to forge a unified approach to environmental degradation, and to establish conditions where the free movement of goods, services and peoples across the globe becomes possible.

There is a clear recognition in the Bahá'í Holy Writings of the inordinate disparity between the rich and poor as a source of acute suffering and one which keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. There is a call for all people to internalise the principle of the oneness of humanity. The implementation of a world auxiliary language and a standard script, in addition to the mother tongue, is also advocated as a basis for improved communication between all inhabitants of the world.³² For Bahá'ís, social problems must be resolved on the basis of universal justice. All the resources for the world must be exploited for the benefit of mankind as a whole.

Another unique social principle of the Bahá'í faith, which is a non-issue in both philosophical and religious Taoism, is that men and women have equal rights. Women have traditionally played a lesser role in the patriarchal pantheon of the Taoist religion with most of the major gods being men. In the Bahá'í Faith, the question of equality of education and opportunity for the female sex takes precedence worldwide. Its scriptures

³² See Chew, Phyllis Ghim Lian. "Whither the International Auxiliary Language?" *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 2.2. 1989, pp 1-11.

unequivocally pronounce the equal status of women as the touchstone for a mature, society, which has given up discriminating against or suppressing any group on the basis of biological difference.

An additional feature which sets the Bahá'í Faith apart from Taoist beliefs and practices and which places it squarely in the 20th Century is its pronouncement that religion must be in harmony with science and reason, that is, religion and science must complement one another and not be mutually exclusive. Bahá'ís believe that value-free science without religious and moral attachment fosters materialism. Similarly religion without the influence of science often leads to fanaticism. Last but not least, the Bahá'í scripture also stresses that all people must independently seek the truth with determination and a critical mind, a demand which Bahá'ís deem essential because preconceptions hamper the irrefutable growth of contact between people, races and religions and are a hindrance to the goal of unification. As the Bahá'í Faith is devoid of a clergy (a significant departure from all previous religions, including religious Taoism), the independent investigation of truth becomes a crucial principle.

Conclusion

To be human is to question, and to engage in a variety of quests; for survival, for liberty, for truth, for happiness, and, in many cases, for some kind of meaning to life. There are at least six combinations of fundamental questions and resulting quests comprising human existence. One is survival: "What must I do to survive?" Next is security: "What can I hold on to?" or "In whom can I put my trust?" Next is to do with quality of life: "How can I be happy?". Another common quest is personal identity "Who am I?" Then there are the transpersonal goals which has brought forth the quest for truth, excellence, liberty and justice in all periods of history, such as: "What is the meaning of life?", "Is there a purpose to my existence?" and "How can I make this world a better place?" In the past, adherents of religious Taoism have been essentially preoccupied with the first three questions, being concerned primarily with issues of personal survival and well-being. The Bahá'í Faith, on the other hand, emphasises

both personal salvation and social salvation, viewing the two as inter-related.

It is difficult to reconcile religious Taoism with many classic Taoist texts such as the *Tao-te ching* and the *Chuang-ízu*. Two thousand years of tradition has set it apart. Religious Taoism has evolved over centuries to fulfil basic human needs and concerns about the Ultimate and as a result has accumulated an enormous "bible" of esoteric texts, comprehensible only to those with special competence. There has also developed a grand liturgical tradition based on ritual texts, a well-defined eremitic tradition and distinctive techniques towards transcendent immortality.

Nevertheless, religious Taoism may be viewed as an adaptive set of strategies for people to cope with their relationship to life, death and immortality since it offers immediate attention to the devotee and uses a holistic approach to solve individual problems. Centred on the creation of harmony between the different worlds of existence and of the relationship between man and the "spirit" of nature, it affirms the mystical experience while encouraging a moral life.

Like everything ancient, religious Taoism has to confront the challenges of societal change. Religious Taoism has been dying for centuries and modern science and materialism is speeding up the process. Whether it can continue to survive the test of time and prosper in the modern world will depend largely on its effort to rein in excesses, renew its spiritual vigour and serve the needs of a changing society. The Bahá'í Faith can be a way to renew its spiritual life, and apply it to the modern world -- a way to revive it today. It shares with Taoism important fundamental spiritual values and introduces social principles compatible with the spirit of the 20th Century.

In the period 1980-1990 in Singapore, the number of Taoist/Buddhist adherents declined from 73% to 68% of the population,³³ most of its remaining adherents coming from the less-educated Chinese-speaking

³³ See *Census of Population 1980 Release No. 9. Religion and Fertility* and *Census 1990 Advance Data Release*. Dept. Of Statistics, Singapore.

segment of the population.³⁴ A 1988 survey of Singapore religions found that a significant 74.5% of Chinese respondents with no formal education claim to be Taoist/Shénists, while Christianity seems to appeal to those with higher education. A correlation was also found between the medium of instruction (Chinese, English etc) and religious affiliation. Taoism/Shénism is seen as a religion of the Chinese-educated sector of the population while Christianity is seen as the religion of the English-educated. Also, Christianity is on the increase among the younger age group and this is done at the expense of Taoism.³⁵

In recent years, the Singapore Taoist community has risen to the challenge. The recently formed (in 1990) *Taoist Federation of Singapore* has begun to organise public talks and has encouraged the publication of literature both in Chinese and English. Its promotion of *philosophical* Taoism, rather than *religious* Taoism is an attempt to return to the beginning and to emphasise essence over form. It promotes the intrinsic essence of mysticism, naturalism and simplicity rather than the rites and rituals of popular Taoism.³⁶ The community has also initiated the modernising of Chinese temples such as the great Bright Hill Buddhist Temple, the Tua Peh Kong Temple at Kusu or the Siong Lim Temple at Toa Payoh -- such as renovations, repainting of car parks and construction of new buildings.³⁷

To conclude, it is obvious that there is a great variety in appearance, metaphors, and terminology in all the great religions. In this paper, I have attempted to draw out similarities and differences between one of the

³⁴ The bulk of conversions to Christianity occur among teenaged high school students, mostly from a Chinese religious background, most of whom have considerable exposure to the English language and to a "modern" lifestyle.

³⁵ See Tong, Chee Kiong, *Trends in Traditional Chinese Religion in Singapore*.

³⁶ The *Tao-te ching* contains the essence of sacred literature and has often been referred to as the essence of Taoism. See e.g. the speeches given by Taoist leaders during the annual commemoration of World Religion Day, Singapore, 1995 to 1997. *Proceedings of World Religion Day*, Singapore: Singapore Bahá'í Community. 1995. 1997.

³⁷ It should also be noted that while many private Mahayana and spirit-medium temples have been swept away by urban redevelopment, many have gone into high-rise apartments from which the mediums often operate on a part time basis.

oldest and the youngest religions of the Chinese as practised in Singapore. The greatest differences between the Taoist religion and the Bahá'í Faith lie in their social laws, vision and practices, rather than in their spiritual aspirations. Religions' greatest affinity with one another, however, is their intrinsic spiritual concern with life, death and immortality. All the great religions have been the foundation of great cultures, and for thousands of years, provided the moral beacon and ballast for millions of people in their everyday life. As the *I Ching* reiterates: "In this world there are many different roads but the destination is the same. There are a hundred deliberations but the result is one."³⁸ The aim of the Bahá'í Faith is to revive the spiritual traditions and extend their teachings to the modern world.

I am no longer a child and the gods which adorn the altars of my ancestors have long since been discarded. In their former places of abode, tall skyscrapers have arisen, reflecting the concerns of a current materialistic age. Nevertheless, these childhood images of pious worship and deep reverence to spirits and ancestors have retained a special place in my heart. If it is true that the child is the father of the man, then in some way, such images must have helped me to seek and recognise the truth, the enduring and the sacred, in other places and forms. I continue to walk the path of my ancestors but with modern shoes. I pray, I worship and give thanks for blessings and I am sure if my ancient ancestors were alive, they would have given Bahá'u'lláh a place of honour on the altar of worship, believing sincerely in their hearts, that the spirit of this Great Being, whatever His origin and history, is deserving of praise and veneration and which comes, naturally, under the umbrella of the unfathomable, unreachable and utterly remote being -- the Great Tao.

³⁸ *The Book of Changes (I Ching)* cited in J. Legge, *The Four Books*, pt. 2, ch. 5. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960.