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The Views of Mike Polioudakis versus Taoism and Zen

I have said people should not worry too much about dogma or system but should act on simple decency as much as possible. Our feelings and prejudices are not always reliable guides but, if we refer back to a few clear ideas of decency, refer back to Jesus, and we will revise and improve as we go along, then that is about the best we can do. As an example, I used Achilles' choice of simple decency in letting Priam bury Hector.

In contrast to Achilles, as an example of a well-intended system but one that goes wrong because it is a system, I used Krishna talking Arjuna into fighting because to fight is to carry out a cosmic duty, carry out a social duty, and to perpetuate the Dharma system as the best possible thing. Whether you agree that Arjuna should fight is not at issue. Whether you think we have duties to society and to the universe is not at issue. Arjuna does not simply do the right thing for the right reasons. Instead, (a) he acts in the context of a system (b) in which he gets justification from the system, and so (c) perpetuates the system and perpetuates the ideas that (d) you have to seek justification and (e) you can get justification only from the system. I picked Hinduism because it is a complex beautiful system and the arguments that Krishna gives are so plausible, simple, and appealing. The arguments hide what happens when you "buy into" a system, any system. In case you are annoyed that I pick on Hinduism, I insist that Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, most Confucianism, some forms of Taoism, and some forms of Zen, all have the same faults.

Most Taoism, the Zen that is close to Taoism, and some Buddhism, stress simple spontaneity and not to look to a system for guidance. We should act spontaneously from the heart, albeit following the Tao at the same time. Taoism claims everything will turn out well if we do this, not only for individuals but for society too.

In an essay in which I stated my basic religious position simply, I said to imagine a choice between:

(1) For 10 minutes, you can do as God wishes. You can do the right things for the right reasons. You can follow the Golden Rule and "applies equally". You can see people as other persons like yourself. You can be a decent person. You can help others be decent. You can appreciate the variety of people and appreciate how various kinds of people make the world more interesting and better. You can work hard to make the world better. You approach loving your neighbor. It all tends to come together.

OR

(2) You can go to a pleasurable place for all eternity. The happy place might be Heaven or it might be a Dharma system in which the eternal journey is the destination.

You can't have both.

I always without hesitation choose (1).

Taoism says we should choose neither. Even (1) is a mistake but not a moral mistake. To choose (1) is to stress good, and to stress good is to require bad by way of contrast. To avoid moral dilemmas and moral mistakes, don't even try to be moral. Simply act spontaneously. The Taoist stance seems to be the logical result when we take my position of simple decency to its apparent conclusion.

So what is the difference between my stance and this Taoist stance? Why don't I go all the way to the Taoist stance? I wrote the chapter on Taoism in "Religious Stances" to answer this question. Whether I did a good job there or not, I give a short answer here again.

Taoism is not the logical conclusion of my stance. It errs in thinking it is the natural endpoint of simple decency. It overlooks what nature is really like and what human nature is really like. It overlooks that good and bad are part of human nature and of simple decency. My stance is the "natural" balance between dogma and real nature. Taoism is not the natural balance between dogma and real nature. Taoism comes from imposing unnatural urban romantic dogma about nature. We get a lot of good from taking Taoism seriously but it is not the answer.

Nobody acts perfectly spontaneously and perfectly naturally. If we did, a good share of the time we would steal, lie, gossip, and screw around irresponsibly. To get a good life for ourselves and families, and to make a good society, we have to control both the normally good and normally bad parts of our evolved nature.

Nobody acts perfectly spontaneously. As evolved beings, humans lie to themselves, don't know all the parts of themselves, have a big hidden subconscious, and halt things that should arise such as affection. We are an onion that can't be peeled without destroying the onion.

Some saints might be able to act perfectly spontaneously and might have only a good nature but I doubt they are Taoists, I don't think Taoists had them in mind, and, besides, I want to deal with the real people that we mostly are rather than with saints.

We can be trained to trust ourselves to act well most of the time and so, as a result of self-trust, to act fairly spontaneously. We can be trained to act well most of the time or at least not to act hurtfully. People who trust themselves to act well most of the time can act fairly spontaneously. I think this is what some Taoists had in mind, what some Confucians had in mind, what some Zen people had in mind, and I know this is what I have in mind. I am not sure about Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists.

We can be trained by other people, train ourselves, or, usually a combination. In the end, we have to do a lot of the training ourselves, that is, self-training.

Anybody who thinks he-she can reach Taoist or Zen spontaneity without first going through big training knows nothing of Taoism or Zen. This is similar to the mistake that beginning students make about the “soft” or “internal” martial arts when they think that no sweating and pain is involved.

To get trained and so to act spontaneously a lot of the time, we have had to go through some kind of program. The program need not be elaborate. It need not involve a big religious vision or philosophical scheme. It does need a core vision such as “decency” or “the Tao”. Training need not reintroduce a system in the bad way that I complained about above, although it can. I cannot here explain relations between programs and training.

After we have graduated (“Luke, your training is now complete”), or at least are far enough along, then we act well enough in accord with the ideal and we act spontaneously. We have the kind of character that we were seeking. Aristotle had this relation in mind when he said that people who act nobly, and are taught to act nobly, attain a noble character, and continue to act nobly on their own. He also said the same is true for venal people.

The best training is good examples. Rather than indoctrinate students in ideas only, show them how to behave through good historical examples and good current examples. Deal with cases that don’t fit the theory; deal with real people that don’t fit the theory. This is what Confucius urged and Saint Francis urged. I never pass up a chance to repeat what Saint Francis said: “I always preach, and sometimes I use words”.

Not only does the proper training need a core idea such as “decency”, it needs some principles too such as fair play, the Golden Rule, “applies equally”, nobody left behind, the good of the many, the rights of the few, and the good of the many through the rights of the few. To do the right things for the right reasons, we need the right reasons. We need the right principles. Without those, we really aren’t fully human, and we don’t use all our human abilities including our intellect.

People always have, and always will, fight over principles. We agree on most, but not on all, and not on their application. This topic lies outside the scope of this essay.

Lao Tzu (legendary founder of Taoism) said: “You can’t talk about the true Tao. If you can talk about it, it is not the true Tao”. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (the real founder of Taoism) also said that any kind of discrimination, any “this but not that”, any “good versus bad”, is a deception, a trap, and shuts of the Tao. This is a big hole in the center around which you can spin any fantasies.

In fact, Taoists do talk about the Tao all the time. Taoists have some pretty specific ideas of the Tao and of principles that go along with the Tao. They do discriminate. They do have preferences. They do have right and wrong, good and bad. They just don’t like getting caught doing it. Their ideas are pretty much like the principles of people who seek decency and who don’t impose on neighbors. To get more, read the Taoists.

When Westerners take up Taoism, they project onto the mysterious hole in the center those principles that they think the West should have but no longer adheres to. Westerners use Taoism as an excuse to act more like the better Westerners they wish we all would be. When the Chinese take up Taoism, they do the same thing. They use Taoism as an excuse to act like the better Confucians they wish we all could be. When Western intellectuals and Western quasi-mystics take to Taoism, they do much the same but use the ideas and principles that they wished for before they met Taoism. When Zen took up Taoism, it used Taoism to validate ideas from Buddhism that it had pre-selected, and used Buddhism to validate ideas that they read into Taoism. People do the same thing to Jesus, Mohammad, and Krishna. Taoism appeals more to people who are more fuzzy-headed and kind-hearted about it all.

To say you can't talk about principles and you can't have principles but then to tacitly use principles, and to use much the same principles as other decent people, is hypocrisy. It is hypocrisy even if Taoists are nice guys and have good principles. The hypocrisy discredits Taoism. It puts a sour taste in my mouth even though I like Taoism.

Of course, all religions have hypocrisy. I have contradictions. I am hypocritical although I try to keep it at a minimum. But Taoists don't own up to their hypocrisy and deal with it. They don't allow for the big overlap between Taoism and other religions.

We can't be perfectly natural and perfectly spontaneous, we need core ideas, and we need principles to go along. Most of us, including Taoists, would like our ideas and principles to be mutually consistent and supportive. Chinese thinking tries hard to be systematic and coherent. Taoists are a little more tolerant of inconsistency and self-contradiction than most other major religions but even Taoists try to be self-consistent. Chuang Tzu derided logic but even he tried to be consistent.

In this case, are we forced back into a big system that we have to go along with, that gives us a place, that gives us justification, and is the only way we can find identity? In most other religions, the answer is yes. In Taoism, and hopefully with me, the answer is still no. That is the similarity between me and Taoism, along with resting on basic decency and on respect for persons.

Why and how do we avoid falling back into the big system? We act decently and we act according to principles such as the Golden Rule until we internalize them, then we trust ourselves. In my view, we trust God and his prophets; in the Taoist view, we trust the Tao. We can make mistakes. We need help. We need to re-assess and change from time to time. Different generations do it differently. But we don't need an elaborate system, and such a system does more harm than good. I think this is what Aristotle and Homer (Achilles) were after. I think this is what Chuang Tzu was after some of the time.