DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Seeking God in Taoism

GOD'S fundamental appeal to his creatures is not, at the outset, formulated in ideas, much less in words. It manifests itself in a profound, inexplicable attraction. Even before it takes any shape in symbols, images, myth or dogma, this drawing-power is experienced in the depths of the human spirit, 'at the heart of the heart'. It is present in all that pertains to the 'sacred', in all religions. Whenever it appears in those religious movements which we call animism, the temptation is to regard it as a manifestation of the primitive; but it is more correct to call it primordial. This is because it is a natural emanation of an influence to which all human nature is subject. It is what Lao-tzu calls 'the mystery of mystery'.

All philosophies which stay close to fundamental human experience recognize that whatever goes to make up a human being — his substance or his nature — is a gift of the Creator. This truth can be stated in a whole host of ways; but eventually they are reduced to the same essential statement: the vital breath that gives life to a human being is God's gift. And when we speak of God, we mean that being who is of himself who he is, the one who derives his being from himself and from no other: the one who is total and absolute spontaneity.

What we call 'God', the Confucians call 'Heaven', the Taoists, the *Tao*, which means the Way. The Tao has no other origin than himself. The great classic study of Taoism, *Tao-te-ching*, contains a marvellous phrase, which, in four gigantic strides, enables us to enter into the mystery of the one who reflects none but himself, who has no cause other than himself, and whose own proper nature is the source of all:

> The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth,
> The ways of earth, by those of Heaven,
> The ways of Heaven by those of the Tao,
> And the ways of the Tao, by the Self-so.[1]

This 'Self-so' is the Tao, who is by himself and of himself, because he is pure spontaneity.

This extraordinary text invites us to penetrate a little more deeply into the understanding of the relationship, in classical Taoism, between man and the Tao.

The way of the ancients

Taoism is a philosophical system which evolved between the fifth and the third centuries B.C. Later on, during the third century, this doctrine was the inspiration of what is called the taoist religion. At the present time, the practices and the ceremonial of religious Taoism might appear to the casual observer as an accumulation of superstitions. In fact, they represent the flowering of a deep surge of life which has its origins in prehistoric times in China. When we look at the philosophical school of Taoism (500-300 B.C.) as one system amongst so many others, and alongside Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, we find that it has already had a long history. We must notice as well that it was not until around the first century B.C. that this flourishing philosophical teaching acquired its definitive title of 'The school of the Tao (Way)'.[2]

A reading of philosophical works might tempt us to believe that Taoism is the brain-child of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu.[3] But we must bear in mind that before it became a philosophical system, the ancient seers knew it as a way of life: the art or the method of the Tao. As John Blofield has written, the current of thought discernible in the *Tao-te-ching* of Lao-tzu and in the *Chang-tzu* is like the final blossoming of a great tree whose roots have been pushing down into the darkness since time immemorial:

> My first surprise was to discover that, despite a wide-spread supposition, Lao and Chuang were not the original founders of Taoism, but notable blossoms on a tree hoary with age even in their day — around two-and-a-half millenia ago![4]

Indeed, the thirty-third book of the *Chuang-tzu* itself, entitled 'Under Heaven', invites us to go even further back in time, if we wish to discover the beginnings of the taoist movement. In fact, there existed in the dim and distant past a mysterious principle of order which enable the great taoist masters to seize hold of and to elaborate into a system 'the methods by which the world is ordered'. So we read in *Chuang-tzu*:

> The methods employed in the regulation of the world are many; and (of the employers of them) each believes that the efficiency of his own method leaves nothing to be added to it. But where is what was called of old 'the method of the Tao?'. We must reply 'It is everywhere'. But then whence comes down the spirituality in it? And whence comes forth the intelligence of it? It is that which gives birth to the Sage, and that which gives the King his perfection: and origin of both is the One.[5]

Here we have one of the essential tenets of taoist thought. There must be an explanation for everything that exists; and this is found in the origin. There must be a principle of perfection for everything; and this exists in the

One. Now neither the One nor the origin are abstract concepts; they are realities situated in the invisible world, the world of mystery.

Chuang-tzu continues to elaborate on this ancient 'method of the Tao':

> Not to be separate from his primal source constitutes the Heavenly man;
> Not to be separate from the essential nature thereof, constitutes what we call the Spirit-like man;
> Not to be separate from its real truth constitutes what we call the Perfect man.[6]

These terms will continue to be heard in all taoist literature. They express a philosophy of existence which becomes a real theology. The ideal of the 'Perfect man' or the 'True man' will become identical with the Tao.

After Chuang-tzu, this 'ancient method of the Tao' always found itself taken over by other systems. But whenever these approached Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, they were drawn to re-discover this way of the ancient wisdom and to give it once again the place of honour. They meditated on the sayings of the old masters, and built up the system with which we are conversant. But again, this is no abstract development; it is the result of a long and often sorrowful journeying, for these philosophers were regarded by the Confucians as egoistical. Perhaps they were at times; but theirs is the merit of opening up afresh and keeping open, by means of their axioms and paradoxes, the ways towards the Absolute which dull human wits were always striving to close.

It is time to ask how one can put into words this 'method of the Tao' or 'method of the Way' which has been handed down to us by the fathers of the taoist system. John Blofield attempts to define this system so all-embracing, so difficult to comprehend:

> Taoism — ancient, mysterious, dreamingly poetic — born amidst the shining mists that surround civilization's early beginnings, is a living manifestation of an antique way of life almost vanished from the world. Now that the red tide has engulfed its homeland, who knows its further destiny or whether even tiny remnants of it will survive? For people who recognize the holiness of nature, and desire that spirit should survive the black onrush of materialism, it is a treasure-house wherein, amidst curiously wrought jewels of slight but intrinsic value, are strewn precious pearls, and rare, translucent jades. Folklore, occult sciences, cosmology, yoga, meditation, poetry, quietist philosophy, exalted mysticism — it has them all.[7]

Taoism is all this; and yet it is something altogether different. However, if we wish to grasp what characterized Taoism a hundred years before

Christ's birth, we might do well to turn to the great historian of ancient China, Sze-ma Ch'ien, in his *Shih-chi* or 'Historical Records':

> The Taoist School urges men to unity of spirit, teaching that all activities should be in harmony with the unseen, with abundant liberality towards all things in nature.[8]

This definition of Taoism is remarkable for its conciseness. It is certain that the great masters of Taoism, Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Huai-nan Tzu, Lieh-tzu and others, have been duly attentive to the messages which have come to them from the beyond. They considered that the unseen was, in the final analysis, far more important than what is seen. This is the reason why they have sought to live in harmony with this mysterious beyond, where was to be found the source of one's existence and the final end whither they were to return. What is extraordinary in all this is that these philosophers found a way to read this message in the comings and goings of human nature — in the movement of a myriad of human beings.

The taoist mystique

One must say with all due deference that chinese culture has always been marked by a profound mystical tendency. I am not speaking here of 'mysticism' in any peculiar sense: for example as applied to séances in which Shamans communicate with the other world. This kind of mysticism must indeed be treated with the utmost caution. I am speaking rather of that mysticism latent in chinese philosophy, one which blossoms across the ages of history from roots as ancient as humanity itself. It is the consciousness a person has of living in a universe in which the spiritual, in spite of being hidden, has the habit of flowering in all sorts of places. Belief in the spirits is sometimes all that remains of this basic tendency. But in its more beautiful manifestations, it is the perception of the spiritual within and below the tangible, visible world. When one peoples it with spirits, one makes of it a world that is strange and often terrifying. But in its pure state, this deep sense of a mystery that is always present is something precious; and it has been the constant task of the great taoist masters to preserve it in its uncontaminated essence.

One cannot underestimate the importance of distinguishing Taoism as a body of philosophical and spiritual doctrine from what is called the taoist religion. This latter has become the refuge of all kinds of practices which have nothing to do with the kind of mysticism I have been trying to describe. If we are to discover this profound sense of the sacred we have to clear away a great pile of folklore which covers it over. If we can recognize and remove all the trash which blocks the pure and quite wonderful stream of Taoism — such as John Blofield has tried to describe in the texts we have cited — we shall be doing the religious movement a great service.

Chuang-tzu's writings, so rich and exuberant in their symbolism, open up for us a whole world of the sacred and of mystery. Historians of philosophy like Wing-tait Chan have always stressed 'the mystical way of Chuang-tzu', in contradistinction to 'the natural way of Lao-tzu'.[9] The mystique of the latter is 'natural' in the sense that it never introduces any element that could be called religious. The mysticism of *Tao-te ching* leads us to man's fundamental experience in the Universe. This universe is not peopled with deities; it is animated by a force which is the Virtue (*Te*) or the active Power of Tao, which is present and operates everywhere.

The true taoist doctrine is worthy of our respect because it points the way to the essential and eternal in mysticism: that is, to the perception of the beyond — a different way of seeing, touching, feeling and, indeed, of living. It is not a matter of escaping from the normal human condition to become aware of the Tao, of a presence which permeates everything and is at work everywhere. Rather, as we shall see later on, the very immanence of the Tao reveals its transcendence. In a memorable and lapidary phrase, *Tao-te Ching* explains to us how the power of Tao is at work:

> The Tao produces the one,
> the one produces the two,
> the two produces the three,
> and the three produces all things.[10]

Yet in this production, this chain of creation, the Tao is not separated from these objects. It is present in them by its Virtue. In fact, if one were to ask where the Tao is to be found, the anser must be: 'Everywhere, and in everything'. This teaching on the creation of ten thousand objects by the Tao and its omnipresence in the Universe of the basis of a true mysticism. Hence one may say that the profound sense a man has of the harmony of his own being with nature is an essential form of chinese mysticism. Such experience is very close to what we Christians call the sense of the divine presence in all things.

Though this universal presence is not presented as a personal being, we can see that there is an aspect of this Tao which vibrates in the heart:

> The Way that can be told of is not an unvarying Way;
> The names that can be named are not unvarying names.
> It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang;
> The named is but the mother that rears
> the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind.[11]

This idea of the Tao as mother of all being is of great import in the taoist mystique. All beings originate from the Tao. They come forth in the way that children are born from their mother; to whom, at the last, they return.

In a passage redolent with a contemplative savour, Lao-tzu describes with precision this return of beings to their source. Yet in order to reach this mystic contemplation of the return to the origin, one must bury oneself in silence, in an interior emptiness:

> Push far enough towards the Void,
> Hold fast enough to Quietness,
> And of the ten thousand things
> none can be worked on but by you.
> I have beheld them, whither they go back.
> See, all things, howsoever they flourish
> Return to the root from which they grew.
> This return to the root is called Quietness;
> Quietness is called submission to Fate;
> What has submitted to Fate
> has become part of the always-so.
> To know the always-so is to be Illumined.[12]

The text is a call to contemplate all creatures in their return to their mother, the Tao. The contemplative, in his interior journey, finds in the void — this detachment from all things — his fundamental attachment to his 'Creator'. The 'submission to Fate' mentioned here[13] must, I believe, be taken as referring to total dependence in respect of the Tao, the unconditional submission to him which he desires of us. It is an experience similar to that which all mystics are called to undergo when, in the last stages of their ascent, they come face to face with their God. When the Tao is thus presented as the mother of all beings, it commands an attitude of reverence which is an essential of Taoism.

Just as the Tao is of its nature pure spontaneity, so it confers on all creatures the power of acting, according to their own nature, with analogous spontaneity. Lao-tzu gives expression to this relationship:

> Tao gave them birth
> The 'power' of Tao reared them,
> Shaped them according to their kinds,
> Perfected them, giving each of them its strength.
> Therefore of the ten thousand things
> there is not one that does not worship Tao,
> doing homage to its power.

The Tao also reverences its creatures. It shapes them all according to their nature. This is why Lao-tzu counsels the Seer to dispose himself towards creatures as the Tao himself fashions them:

Rear them, but do not lay claim to them,
Control them, but never lean upon them,
Be chief among them, but do not manage them.
This is called the mysterious power.[14]

Though the Tao is usually treated as an impersonal force, one must recognize that in the taoist philosophy, as in their texts from which we have cited, a certain 'tenderness of touch' between the Tao and creatures becomes apparent. It is one that is recognizable in all the 'natural' mystics, in the intimacy of their contact with the mystery of existence.

Man and the Tao

The taoist mystique is like an ocean which stretches beyond our horizons. It would be ludicrous to imagine that we could give a satisfactory account of it in a few pages. Its quality resides in the fact that it opens on to mystery whilst staying as close as possible to the concrete reality of the ten thousand beings. In them man is shown the sign of the 'divine' presence; for one may legitimately accept this as synonymous with the presence of the Tao. In religious Taoism, the Tao reveals itself in privileged and personalized manifestation like the 'Three pure Ones', which has sometimes been called the Taoist Trinity; whilst in philosophical Taoism, the same mystery is revealed in all creatures. This symbolism has been systematized in the *I-ching* or 'Book of Changes'. For the Taoist, it is the whole human composite which is the sign and symbol of the mystery. This is why the taoist mystique finds its truth in the correspondence of the human microcosm with the universal macrocosm.

The Chinese has a profound sense of the sacred; but that sacred is not set apart from the milieu in which it manifests itself. It is a point which R. C. Zaehner makes with such emphasis.[15]

This harmony between man and the universe is the basis of taoist spirituality. Yet it is here that the question arises: does this way of immanence open out on to a transcendence? Is this harmonious dynamic between the universe and the human to find its fusion by means of a transcendent principle? The commentators, Chinese as well as the foreigners, reach different conclusions on this. One important view of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu leads us towards a substantial and real transcendence, which is called the Tao. The first line of the *Tao-te Ching* leads immediately into the realm of the Spirit. Arthur Waley's translation reads: 'The Way that can be told is not an Unvarying Way'; whereas I myself prefer the rendering, ' . . . is not *The* Unvarying Way'. This way, the Tao, is called 'unvarying', 'The Unvarying'; it is always the same, it does not change. It is towards this 'Always-so' that man turns his gaze from the moment when he feels himself inexorably caught up in the unending movement of a universe which is ever changing. In the *I-ching*, the 'Book of Changes', all

the symbolism expresses movement. Mais Wang-Pi (A.D. 226-49), the great metaphysician and highly original expositor of this *Book of Changes* and of the *Tao-te Ching*, says simply: 'Change does not explain itself by change'. There must be some aspect, some principle of unity, if one can express it thus, some source of power. For Wang-pi, the movement of *yin-yang*, the 'feminine' and 'masculine' principles, cannot explain itself by means of itself. It is therefore necessary to return to the source of this duality — complementary though the *yin* and the *yang* be — and to recognize in it the existence of the One. It can be given any name you like; but the fact remains that we must accept its existence as the principle which gives intelligibility to the very essence of the *yin* and the *yang*, and makes possible their continual interaction. This is equally the implication of the statement already cited, which culminates in those deeply meditative words 'The ways of the Tao (are conditioned) by the Self-so'; that is to say, the Tao is not absolutely conditioned. The Tao is there, where it is, what it is, an absolute without any cause or explanation other than itself. I realize that such a conclusion is not acceptable to many thinkers. But it cannot be denied that this is the obvious meaning of this text and of many others.

The Tao, then, is the principle of all things. It exists by itself, of itself. At the same time, it pours itself out in creation, and gives to ten thousand beings their own proper nature. The Taoists are a people having an origin: they have their roots. Finality has meaning for them only in so far as it is the final flowering of the initial incursion. Everything has its beginning in the 'primordial breath', the *Yuan-chi*. It is indeed the same *pneuma* as that which God has used for making one human being out of another. It is this 'original breath' which the Taoist continually seeks to recapture in the very depths of his own being, for it is the source of life. The Tao does not impose upon man any external rules in the form of commandments inscribed on tablets of stone; rather, there is an 'interior' law, a *ming*, an ordinance which is identical with life: *ming* is life (cf note 13).

It is this interior law of harmony with the Tao which lies at the roots of being itself: it is this which the Taoists are constantly seeking to comprehend. The exterior ordinances of the Confucianists have scarcely any interest for them. The focus of the Taoist is wholly other: this interior law inscribed on our very nature.

It is this absolute which Lao-tzu has called the Tao. Chuang-tzu prefers to give it the name of 'nothing' — the chinese word *wu*. Not surprisingly, to offer the theory that 'everything' comes from 'nothing' is often taken as a sheer non-sense. On the contrary, to state that this principle of all things is 'nothing' or 'nothingness' is to set it in the absolute of metaphysical existence. To say that it is 'no-thing' is to remove it, at the outset, from the onslaught of human reason. Certain philosophers are very happy to see in it a proof of God's 'non-existence'. But this is certainly contrary to what the Taoists mean when they name this first principle *Wu*, 'No-thing'.

This *Wu*, then, is the source of everything. It contains all things in germ; or perhaps better, in potency. For the rest, what difference does the 'how' make, since we cannot explain it? The fact is that this *Wu*, the 'non-existent', produces the *Yu*, 'the existent'. It is all there in the metaphysics of Chuang-tzu:

> At the absolute beginning there was the non-existent' (*Wu*).
> From this surged the 'one'.
> There was 'oneness', but without any shape.[16]

As Max Kaltenmark notes, we may imagine a kind of absolute which Chuang-tzu calls the 'non-existent', and Lao-tzu, the *Tao*.[17]

It is this nothingness, then, which is the source of everything without itself being any of the things of which it is the source and origin. All that exists (*yu*) emanates from this principle which, though it is no-thing, contains everything. Thus it is that this design of non-existence is that of the supreme reality. It is hardly a cause for wonder that Meister Eckhart says of the divine nature — 'the Godhead' — that it is 'nothingness': the nothingness of existence, subsisting by its own proper existence. I cannot refrain from noticing that what led these thinkers of ancient China to place the 'non-existent' at the beginning of all things is the common human experience that compels us to identify the ultimate interior reality as both total plenitude and absolute nothingness. We must also remember the principle enunciated by Lao-tzu in the *Tao-te Ching*, that 'in truth, Being and Not-being grew out of one another'.[18] This intuition enabled Lao-tzu to enter the profundity of the mystery of the beyond.

One final question arises. If man, like every other creature, aspires to 'return to the source', how far can he climb, or descend, to it by following the road he chooses for this return. Having emanated from the Tao, man aspires to return to it; for without falsifying the thought of the great taoist masters one can say that the depths of man's being is divine. We may read Chuang-tzu as he offers us a description of Lao-tzu: not of one lost in ecstasy like a christian saint, with face turned towards heaven, but so absorbed in himself as to seem like a log of dry wood. Awakened from this ecstasy — one should say rather 'en-stasy', Lao-tzu simply said, 'I went in spirit to the beginning of everything'.[19]

What the taoist seer yearns for is a union with Tao which is so complete that he can become a veritable incarnation of the Tao. In the *Huai-nan Tau*, composed in the second century B.C., we find a systematic theology of union with the Tao. This union is composed of degrees, precisely analysed and presented. The topmost degree is that of *chen-jen*, the 'real man'. Certainly, there exist many degrees of perfection in Taoism, each one with its precise and careful description. The 'Saint' is one who 'has the Tao for his friend'; but this is not yet the highest degree of perfection, which is attained by him

who can be called the *chen-jen* — the real or true man. 'The real man is he whose nature is one with the Tao'. He is wholly inserted into the One. He has transcended all duality. This is why it is written that he is fixed in his One, and takes no account of 'two'.[20]

These are some of the traits which characterize taoist mysticism as described for us by its spiritual masters. If we entered their realm which is opened up by their practices of meditation, we would discover another world, in which the transcendence of the Tao is affirmed in more explicit fashion. But this would take us far beyond this present, necessarily brief study. What we have tried to show here is how a mystical system like that of Taoism opens out on to vast horizons which beckon to us to take a step into the beyond in order to enter into the mystery of everything. The road is not an easy one, for as *Huai-nan Tzu* has written:

> The eyes of the perfect man must be closed in 'The house of the Great Night' in order that they may open once more, when he is awakened, in the dwelling place of the radiant Splendour.[21]

Yves Raguin S.J.

NOTES

[1] *Tao-te Ching*, ch 25. Cf Arthur Waley's translation, *The Way and its Power* (London, 1956), p 174. The *Tao-te Ching* is attributed in the tradition to a certain Lao Tan, also called Lao-tzu, who must have lived between the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. However, the Lao-tzu we know is of a much later compilation.

[2] The term 'School of the Tao' is used for the first time in a history of Ancient China, written about 100 B.C. by Szu-ma Ch'ien, and entitled *Shih-chi* — 'Historical Records'.

[3] The name Chuang-tzu (Master Chuang) is used to designate both the author Chuang Chou, whose *floruit* is probably between the last decades of the fourth century B.C. and the beginning of the third, and also the work attributed to him. It is the same with Lao-tzu.

[4] John Blofield, *Taoism: the quest for immortality* (London/Boston/Sydney, 1979), p vi.

[5] *Chuang-tzu*, book 33; translated by James Legge in *The Writings of Chuang-tzu.*

[6] *Ibid.* [7] Blofield, *ibid.*

[8] Szuma Chien, *Historical Records*, ch 130. Translated by Derk Bodde, in *A history of chinese philosophy*, by Fung Yu-lan, vol I, p 170.

[9] Wing-tait Chan, *A source book in chinese philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1963), pp 137 and 177. [10] *Tao-te Ching*, ch 42 (all translations, except otherwise stated, are my own).

[11] *Ibid.*, ch I; trad Waley, *op. cit.*, p 141. [12] *Ibid.*, ch 16, cf Waley, p 162.

[13] The chinese word for fate is *ming*. It can also mean life, destiny, decree, ordinance.

[14] *Tao-te Ching*, ch 51, cf Waley, p 205.

[15] R. C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p 239.

[16] *Chuang-tzu*, book 12.

[17] Max Kaltenmark, *Lao-tzu and Taoism* (Stanford University Press, 1969), p 39.

[18] *Tao-te Ching*, ch 2, cf Waley, p 143. [19] *Chuang-tzu*, book 21.

[20] Claude Larre, *Le traité VII du Houai Nan Tseu: esprits legers et subtils animateurs de l'essence* (Ricci Institute, Taipei/Paris, 1981), p 62. [21] *Ibid.*, p 65.