

The concept of infinity in Western and Eastern philosophies is very similar in some respects yet different in others. In most Western religions, the Absolute Infinite is referred to as God. In Taoism, the Infinite is called Tao, or The Way. Another way to think of Tao is as the source of everything: “We know that life and the universe have a source, but the nature and depth of that source lie beyond our ken.” (Walker, forward) Even though separated by land, the ideas of the Infinite in both Taoism and Western religions developed similarly, with the same attributes and metaphors used to describe it, yet Taoism also has some unique concepts of the Infinite.

Lao Tzu founded Taoism, a philosophical and religious tradition, about 2600 years ago. His writings were collected in a book titled the Tao Te Ching, or the Book of the Good and Natural Way, which was divided into 81 chapters. (The Tao Te Ching has been translated an almost infinite number of times since it was written. In this essay, we will use two different translations to get a wider perspective.) Many scholars, however, doubt that Lao Tzu ever existed and state that the Tao Te Ching could easily have been the product of several authors, male and female, over a period of several hundred years. To the Taoist of course the question of authorship holds no heavy significance. For them what matters is that the Tao Te Ching was begun at approximately the same time that the Confucius lived, which places much Taoist philosophy against a Confucian backdrop. Other books of significance to Taoism include the Chuang-tzu and the Xisheng jing. While the Chuang-tzu does not specifically mention the Tao Te Ching within its pages, the Chuang-tzu does refer to Lao Tzu and his ideas. The Xisheng jing is mainly a mystical text. (Izutsu, 287-297)

The primary focus in Taoism is on the Way (Tao). The Tao is something that is dark and unknowable; it existed before Heaven itself; it is the pattern of the universe. According to the

Taoist mystical text Xisheng jing, “The Tao is without shape or end.”(5.1) Since the Tao is without end then it must be without limit. If the Tao is unlimited then it is infinite.

Lao Tzu conceived the Tao as being the One, the source of all created things: “Everything that flourishes dissolves again into the source.” (Tao Te Ching, 16) Anaximander of Miletus, a Greek philosopher who was a contemporary of Lao Tzu, had a similar idea: “The source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity.” (19) This “source” is assumed to be infinite, as every finite thing came out of it. The “necessity” of returning to the source is never stated explicitly in the Tao Te Ching, but perhaps that is because it is obvious that things must return when they die. Where else would they go? The Tao surrounds everything and gives life to it: “The great Tao floods and flows in every direction. Everything in existence depends on it, and it doesn’t deny them. ... Everything in existence returns to it.” (Tao Te Ching, 33)

According to the Tao Te Ching, “Something mysterious and perfect existed before even heaven and earth were born. Silent, immeasurable, standing alone and unchanging, moving without end or exhaustion, it is the mother of the known and unknown universe.” (25) In the Bible, the first words are, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth ...” (Genesis 1:1) As with the Tao, God was present in the beginning, before the creation of everything that we know. Lao Tzu used more metaphors than the authors of the Bible did, though. This list of attributes would be enough to write an entire paper, but we will limit ourselves to a few reflections. The Tao is mysterious because it is unknowable, unseen. Christian writers agree that God is perfect; according to Thomas Aquinas, “God Himself is infinite and perfect.” (57) “Silent” is a unique notion, since the God of Christianity communicates with his people: God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, told Noah to

build the ark, and gave Moses the Ten Commandments. In addition, God does not stand alone as Tao does; he is a Trinity accompanied by the angels and the saints. The religions agree that God is unchanging; he was present at the beginning, now, and forever. The “known and unknown universe” is a puzzling idea. Another text translates this phrase simply as “all things.”

Although the Tao, or the absolute infinite, surrounds everything in existence and everything came from Tao and returns to Tao, Tao is said to be hidden: “Invisible yet ever present” (Tao Te Ching, 6) and “Tao is hidden and has no name.” (Tao Te Ching, 41) The idea of a hidden God also occurs in the Kabbalah, a collection of Jewish writings: “That which is hidden is without end and limit; it is unfathomable and nothing exists outside it” (89) and “... since He is both exalted and hidden, He is the essence of all that is concealed and revealed.” (90) The word “hidden” means not only unseen, but also incomprehensible, “unfathomable,” not able to be sensed: “Looked at but not seen, listened to but not heard, grasped for but not held, formless, soundless, intangible: the Tao resists analysis and defies comprehension.” (Tao Te Ching, 14) Bruno stated the same idea in his dialogue on the infinite: “No corporeal sense can perceive the infinite. None of our senses could be expected to furnish this conclusion; for the infinite cannot be the object of sense-perception.” (250) We are finite, so we can only know the infinite indirectly; we may see it in a flash of insight, but words do not exist to communicate that vision exactly.

Taoists also believe that, “The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” (Tao Te Ching, 1.2) It again states in chapter fourteen, printed below, that the Tao cannot be named. In this instance, the eternal name refers to the Tao. Therefore, Tao is not even the name of this infinite thing; it is merely a tool that we use to talk about it and attempt to understand it. Nicolaus of Cusa, a Christian cardinal, voiced

similar thoughts in regard to God: “And I know not how to name Thee because I know not what Thou art, and did anyone say unto me that Thou wert called by this name or that, by the very fact that he named it, I should know that it was not Thy name. For the wall beyond which I see Thee is the end of all manner of signification in names.” (58) This is very similar to how Kabbalahists viewed Ein-Sof (“Infinite”). They stated, “Ein-Sof should not be qualified by any personal attributes or personal epithets of God found in Scripture, nor should such eulogies as Barukh Hu or Yitbarakh be added to it.” (Scholem, 88-89)

Christian mystics as well thought that their God was beyond all description. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth and sixth century Syrian monk, stated in his The Mystical Theology, “He infinitely precedes all conceptions of deprivation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions.” (Mysticism, 213) One cannot describe what one is unable to distinguish between the parts of. In the finite world, one can describe an object’s position (left, right, up, down), shape (square, round, irregular), or size (larger, smaller), but these distinctions disappear in infinity. Who can say where God or Tao exists? If one says that he exists here but not there, then he is limited in reference to that which is outside of him. All descriptions of the Absolute Infinite are paradoxes, e.g. “God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” (qtd. in Borges, 190) Chapter 14 of the Tao Te Ching is another example of the paradox of trying to describe the Absolute Infinite:

Look at it: nothing to see.  
Call it colorless.  
Listen to it: nothing to hear.  
Call it soundless.  
Reach for it: nothing to hold.  
Call it intangible.

Triply *undifferentiated*,  
It merges into oneness,  
not bright above,  
not dark below.

*Never oh! never*

*can it be named.*  
It reverts, it returns  
To unbeing.  
Call it form of the unformed,  
the image of no image.

*Call it unthinkable thought.*  
Face it: no face.  
Follow it: no end.

Holding fast to the old Way,  
We can live in the present.  
Mindful of the ancient beginnings  
we hold the thread of the Tao.  
(Tao Te Ching, 14, emphasis added)

As is seen in the above chapter, Taoists viewed the Tao as being undifferentiated, and unable to be conceived in our finite minds: the unthinkable thought. We can think that the Absolute Infinite exists, but we cannot understand it. Similarly, Jewish Mystics thought, “Ein-Sof is the absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations, according to some even no volition. It does not reveal itself in a way that makes knowledge of its nature possible, and it is not accessible even to the innermost thought (hirhir ha-lev) of the contemplative.” (Scholem, 89) The author of The Cloud of Unknowing, a well known Christian mystical text, agrees, stating that, “For of all other creatures and their works, yea, and of the works of God’s self, may a man through grace have fullhead of knowing, and well he can think of them: but of God Himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think.” (Mysticism, 308) Meister Eckhart says the same, “[God is] so elemental that we can say nothing about it excepting that it is naught.” Similar to line 15 above Eckhart says, “His simple nature is in form formless.” (Mysticism, 271)

According to the Tao Te Ching the infinite Tao creates everything and brings about harmony. “The Way (Tao) bears (or brought forth) one. The one bears two. The two bear three.

The three bear the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry the yin on their shoulders and hold in their arms the yang, whose interplay of energy makes harmony.” (Tao Te Ching, 42)

In a kabbalistic view the infinite Ein-Sof had divine emanations (sefirot), which some call angels, that then create the world. Plotinus, author of the Enneads, believed that from the One (infinite God) comes the Nous, a world of forms and ideas. Then the Nous is realized as potentiality and contemplates the One. By contemplating the One it is filled with content which in turn becomes the whole of real existence. From the Nous then comes the soul. The soul then imparts form to matter and creates the body; hence, the world is created. (Mysticism, 203-210)

In all the above-mentioned sources the infinite brought about something in order that this new thing would create the world. According to these sources, the infinite does not directly create the finite. It creates the intermediate step, the thing that is not quite infinite or finite.

In Taoism, a model for a Taoist to follow is a baby. The baby embodies all the ideals that Taoists desire.

Being full of power  
Is like being a baby.  
Scorpions do not sting,  
Tigers don't attack,  
Eagles don't strike.  
Soft bones, weak muscles,  
But a firm grasp.  
Ignorant of the intercourse  
of man and woman,  
yet the baby penis is erect.  
True and perfect energy!  
All day long screaming and crying,  
But never getting hoarse.  
True and perfect energy.  
To know harmony  
Is to know what's eternal.  
To know what is eternal  
Is enlightenment.  
Increase of life is full of portent:  
The strong heart exhausts the vital breath.  
The full-grown is on the edge of age.  
Not the Way.  
. What's not the Way soon dies.  
(Tao Te Ching, 55)

The infinite cannot be known through the intelligence. If one wants to know Tao, one must let go of prior knowledge: “Therefore, to see beyond boundaries to the subtle heart of things, dispense with names, with concepts, with expectations and ambitions and differences” (Tao Te Ching, 1) and “In the pursuit of learning, every day something is added. In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.” (Tao Te Ching, 48) This implies that knowledge impedes in following the Tao. For if in following the Tao you get smaller, everything you learn with the intellect forces you backwards. A baby does not know much yet, so he may be small with ease. Nicolaus of Cusa’s “Learned Ignorance” theory is similar to this: “It behoveth, then, the intellect to become ignorant and to abide in darkness if it would fain see Thee.” (59) In Christian mysticism there is also a similar notion: Pseudo-Dionysius used this idea extensively in his writings on the Divine Darkness. “In diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise, by unknowing, towards the union, as far as is attainable, with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge.” (Mysticism, 212)

Lao Tzu had some unique ideas concerning the nature of the infinite as well, ideas not found in other religious interpretations of the Absolute Infinite. He believed that Tao is empty, yet full of every created thing: “Tao is a whirling emptiness, yet when used it cannot be exhausted. Out of this mysterious well flows everything in existence.” (Tao Te Ching, 4) He also compares Tao to a bellows: “Tao is like a bellows: empty but inexhaustible. The more you move it, the more it makes.” (Tao Te Ching, 5) No other religions talk of an “empty” God. The inner emptiness of a useful object is a central idea to Lao Tzu: “Thirty spokes meet at a hollowed-out hub; the wheel won’t work without its hole. A vessel is moulded from solid clay;

its inner emptiness makes it useful. To make a room, you have to cut doors and windows; without openings, a place isn't livable. To make use of what is here, you must make use of what is not." (Tao Te Ching, 11) The Tao "is not" to us of the finite world. It is not seen, touched, heard, smelled, or tasted. Yet, everything in the universe comes out of it.

The Western and Taoist philosophies are similar yet unique concerning the infinite. This could be evidence of a perennial philosophy. If the notions of infinity are that similar, and infinity is one of the most important aspects behind religions because it is an attribute of God, then maybe all religions are not as different as we think.

Anaximander of Miletus. p 19.

Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologica. "The Infinity of God." p 57.

Azriel. The Early Kabbalah. "Explanation of the Ten Sefirot." p 89-90.

Bruno. First Dialogue. p 250.

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