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Examining the Birth of a New Theology Through Chuang Tzu's "Discussion on Making All Things Equal"

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"Pain is the force that breaks the shell of our understanding".

Kahlil Gibran

New theologies are not born out of contentment. Around 450 BCE a new theology emerged in China that would grow to be one of the world's most influential faiths, commonly known today as Taoism. With 2,670,000 adherents worldwide as of 2001 (Matthews), the concepts espoused by Taoism and contained in the writings of Chuang Tzu are now familiar to the modern reader, seeping even into our collective culture. At the time of their writing, however, these concepts were revolutionary. Examining the broader scope of the time in which Chuang Tzu lived gives the reader a better perspective to understand how the social unrest and the rigid prevailing religious doctrine of the day set the stage for the birth of this radical new theology.

Little is known about Chuang Tzu, alternately known as Zhuangzi (Fox), but his writings, along with the writings of Lao Tzu (Gleghorn), would form the basis of the faith initially known as the Way", literally translated "the path", and later known as Taoism. Born in what is now known as Honan province in Western China (Fox), Chuang Tzu lived during a time commonly referred to as the period of The Warring States (403-221 BCE) (Owen). As the name implies, the time frame known as The Warring States was a time of vast political and social upheaval. For hundreds of years prior to Chuang Tzu, China had been fraught with political tension as various smaller

vassal states, of which there were hundreds, controlled by overlords waged war with the larger and economically and militarily stronger states as they attempted to expand their territory and influence. The long term effects of ongoing war are not only inevitable poverty and social disintegration, but also a sense of uncertainty, creating a population ready for clear answers, explanations and permanent solutions. In addition, it can be theorized that the prevalent philosophical doctrine prior to Chuang Tzu also weighed in heavily in preparing the way for the acceptance of a new way of thinking.

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,... It is the opium of the people”.
Karl Marx

The goal of most religions and belief systems is to provide a context and framework for our understanding the events around us, in addition to providing a template and a path in helping to understand our place in the world and pointing the way to fulfillment. One hundred years prior to Chuang Tzu, Confucius (551-479 BCE) offered one such path. An article posted to the ILoveGod.com website entitled “Confucianism” explains that “though not organized as a religion, it [Confucianism] has deeply influenced East Asian spiritual and political life in a comparable manner”. “His [Confucius’] philosophy emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, and justice and sincerity”. The overriding theme of Confucianism is to provide guidelines for moral living and right relationship with the emphasis being on outward action. Observance of rites, proper worship and proper behavior formed the path to social harmony (Chan). This idea is synopsised in the Analects Chapter 12 verse 2 when Confucius admonished his followers “Do not impose on others what you yourself

do not desire. In this way you will be free from ill will whether in a state or in a noble family.”

In contrast to Confucianism’s focus on outward action, the main theme of Chuang Tzu’s writing is “freedom” (Peregrine). It is easy to see how this concept could provide the perfect antidote to an oppressed people in a war ravaged country for whom the Confucian dictates of right conduct had, for more than a hundred years, failed to effect change.

Exactly how did the teachings of Chuang Tzu address the issues of the day? Unlike many systems of thought, Chuang Tzu does not offer a method or a system for enlightenment or social change. Instead, as illustrated in Chapter 2 “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”, he focuses on a few of the more important Taoist concepts most easily understood as non-action, non-judgment, and non-attachment

“The sage is not concerned with changing the world, but rather, attempts to live in the world in such a way that is in accordance with Nature”
Doug Phillips

Chuang Tzu refrains from commenting directly on external events or recommending correct external behavior or reactions; rather his teachings continually point to the central idea of “wu-wei“, loosely translated non-doing or non-action. It is, in a sense, the anti-method method. In chapter 2, he reminds his followers “When the way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mo-ists.” This is not to be understood as inertia or stubborn immovability, but rather, as Alan Watts says, “this is what we mean by going with the grain, rolling with the punch...”(Wu-Wei)

“Knowing is futility...the only thing of which we can be certain is uncertainty”.
Chuang Tzu

Chuang Tzu proposes that the difficulty lies not in the external events [that were happening], but rather in the perception of those events being the only thing that needs to be addressed. Yet rather than trying to offer a correct perception, he offers instead only encouragement to the awareness of perception itself in a kind of non-judgmental detachment. In Chapter 2 of “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”, this concept is communicated as Chuang Tzu explains; “ A road is made by people walking on it, things are made so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so.” The idea that perception is reality is reiterated later in this chapter as Chuang Tzu uses the analogy of the dreamer. “While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we will know that this is all a great dream.”

To the western mind, these concepts of non-action and non-judgment may seem fatalistic until viewed in the light of another core concept of Taoism, that is the fluidity and interconnectedness of all things is vital to their very existence.

“Everything has its “that”, everything has its “this”. From the point of view of “that” you cannot see it. “So I say, “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that – where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way [of judgment and action], but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He

recognizes a “this” but a “this which is also “that,” a “that which is also “this”.

His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact does he still have a “this” and “that”? (Tzu).

It is in this argument that the logic of non-judgment and non-action becomes clear. If all things exist only in terms of their opposite and are in fact dependant upon that opposite for existence, making a value judgment would be nonsensical. Therefore, the question of appropriate action is no longer a valid question. Put another way, if one does not know the question, how is one to know the answer?

In his “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”, Chuang Tzu is not interested in offering answers or issuing dictates as he says “If the way is made clear, it is not the way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice.” and “therefore understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest.” (Tzu) But beyond exhorting his listeners to not cling to their attitudes regarding perception and the need for action, he goes farther and encourages them also to not cling to the language of his message “Words are not wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, do they really say something?” It seems that not only is truth ultimately a slippery concept for Chuang Tzu, but words themselves, while helpful in communicating an idea, are not to be construed as truth in and of themselves and so non-attachment is encouraged.

While by no means comprising the entirety of the doctrines of Taoism, the “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” does give the reader a glimpse into the teachings of Chuang Tzu and the alternative system of thought that was a radical departure from the teachings of the day.

This, however, would not be the only time when history would witness this

particular swing of the theological pendulum. In years to come, halfway across the globe, a strikingly similar shift in religious thought would occur.

“The Lord said to Moses, “...I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction.”
Exodus 24:12

In the Middle East, Judaism was the predominant faith beginning in Approximately 1300 BCE. In many ways Judaism held in common some of the overriding themes of Confucianism, with its emphasis on the letter of the law, focus on good deeds, religious ritual and strict guidelines regarding personal and community conduct.

“The kingdom of God is within you.”
Luke 17:21

With a population caught in the grip of political oppression beginning around 6 BCE, in the Middle East, the tenacious grip of Judaism would begin to loosen as the teachings of the man known as Jesus, who would become one of the most influential persons of all time, began to be proliferated. His message, as much at odds with the rigidity of Judaic law as Chuang Tzu’s had been with Confucianism, also carried the promise of freedom.

“If you hold to my teaching...Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32)

Is this shift in focus from the external to the internal, as illustrated in “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” and seen in various cultures and times through history, simply the natural progression in man’s pursuit of the holy? Or can it be explained in terms of a reactionary knee-jerk reflex as the oppressed, disillusioned with the lack of external answers, inevitably swing to the extreme in an attempt to understand the world

around them, find explanations and solutions, and seek solace? Perhaps the final understanding of what causes radical shifts in thought and faith is best left in the hands of theologians, and while a strong case could be made to conclude the latter, Chuang Tzu would counsel his followers to simply "Forget the years, forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home!"

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