

Compare and Examine the major differences between the Christian understanding and the Daoist understanding of life and death?

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Introduction

Comparing and understanding the differences between the Christian and Daoist understandings of life and the afterlife can be a complex and difficult topic to tackle. The two philosophies hail from opposite ends of the Asian continent, so not surprisingly it can be hard to find comparisons in the afterlife as well as ritual or execution of beliefs.

However, on closer examination, there is more in common than most may think. For example, comparisons can include the oneness of God and the Dao, the importance of ritual, the belief in an afterlife, and the idea that the human body and soul are separate entities which are released from one another after the advent of death.¹ This shows that although Christian and Daoist thinking evolved separately and far away from each other on Planet Earth, they share many similar forms of thinking. This essay will be divided into two main sections, “Life, meditation and cultivation” which will focus on similarities between both Christian and Daoist ideas

¹ Eva Wong, 1997, The Shambhala Guide to Taoism, Shambhala Guides, p. 54

on how to enrich one's life through meditation, and second, "Interpretations of Death and the Afterlife" which will compare the religions' concepts of heaven and hell.

Holy texts

From a background perspective, both Daoism and Christianity follow the teaching of two basic books. Christians follow the teachings of the Holy Bible while Daoists adhere to Dao De Jing. These texts are extremely different in their background, historical period, way they are written and overall message. Dao De Jing is only around 5000 characters long, whilst the Bible including the New Testament and the Jewish holy book (the Torah) runs to more than 750,000 words.

However, it is possible to compare and contrast the texts on a number of teachings and descriptions on how followers must live their life in the current world and what to expect in the afterlife. One could argue though that the New Testament (being Jesus's teachings) is an easier task to compare to Laozi, those being common interpretations that both men were hermits of some kind and were seen as prophets. Their teachings on peace and calmness could also be seen as an analogy of both men's way of thinking.

Life, meditation and cultivation

Immortality is central to Daoist thinking and although not stressed as much as in Christianity, Daoists perform actions such as meditation to try and understand the world around them better, cultivate chi (the material energy of the world) and in turn extend their own existences. On [daopage.org](https://www.taopage.org) one writer explains Daoist meditation not as a series of postures as in yoga but as a way to channel inner concentration to escape from the current world². This lets the mind calm down and reflect, informing those who practice the secrets of life. This also comes into the Daoist ideal of “Wu-wei” or “No doing” where the Daoist philosopher *Laozi* early on in *Dao de jing* stresses that the best thing for humans to do is work as little as possible, enjoy life to the maximum and not exert force when you can possibly help it. For example, Laozi says in part 2 *Dao de jing*:

*The Sage abides in the practice of not acting,
undertakes teaching without words.*³

With this quote we can see that self-reflection and non-exertion of effort is a key pillar to the Daoist faith, in a strong contrast to Christianity.

² Unknown Author, 2018, About Meditation in Daoism, Way of Perfect Emptiness. <https://www.taopage.org/meditation.html>, Date Accessed 7/3/2018

³ Laozi, 2008, Daodejing, Oxford University Press, p. 7

Vocal prayer in most forms of Christianity is the primary way to worship God. With the writing of the *Lectio Divina* (Or divine reading) in the 12th century by Benedictine monks, meditation entered Christian liturgy as an official way to pray.⁴ This form, like Daoism, traditionally isn't seen as a form of exercise but rather reading the bible while simultaneously contemplating its message.

Christians of many churches have subsequently taken on meditation and encouraged it as part of modern prayer. For example the “*The World Community of Christian Meditation*” is a modern day organisation that encourages Christians to sit in silence and communally pray via meditation.⁵ This current organisation was founded by Mr John Main, who was also of Benedictine tradition.

Daoism on the other hand has far fewer sources to go to when it comes to the history and the formulation of its meditation techniques, although it's no surprise that after 2000 years of development many forms exist. During the “Hundred schools of thought era” during the Warring States period, Daoist texts were written down for the first time (as were Confucian texts and many other great pieces of Chinese philosophical works). Dao De Jing notes that controlled breathing techniques (often in our era, associated with meditation) are essential to one's enlightenment in verse 10.

⁴ Thompson, Soul Feast: An Invitation To The Christian Spiritual Life, Westminster John Knox Press, p24

⁵ Unknown, About The World Community for Christian Meditation, WCCM, 2015, <http://wccm.org/content/about-world-community-christian-meditation>, Date Accessed 7/4/2018

Supporting the earthly soul, hugging the One, can you ensure they are not lost?

Concentrating Qi to its weakest, can you be a baby boy?

Washing and cleaning the dark mirror, can you make it without stain?

Loving people and giving life to the state, can you do it without knowledge?

Opening and closing heaven's gate, can you do it like a woman?

Discerning the four directions, can you do it without knowledge?⁶

This could be interpreted as Laozi hinting towards breathing control and meditation, especially the line about “*Concentrating Qi to its weakest*” which is common in most popular forms of meditation in the Daoist community. It's also noted in popular Chinese religion that Confucius lived at the same time as Laozi, Confucius stressed the importance of learning and of thinking about what you have learnt. For example, in *Lunyu* the prime Confucian text. Line 6.7 says;

“The Master said: Ah!, Yan Hui could attach his mind for three months without interruption, whereas others only manage now and then”⁷

This shows that during the warring states period, not only Daoist but Confucian thinking emphasised the practice that we call meditation for self-reflection and guidance. Being written in the warring states period and knowing that Confucius and Laozi most likely met each other, we can see that meditation goes hand in

⁶ Laozi, 2008, *Daodejing*, Oxford University Press, p. 23

⁷ Confucius, 2014, *The Analects*, Norton, p. 15

hand with Daosim from its foundation. Confucianism stresses one's life is in the present and wishes people not to think about death. Knowing this, we can assume that this is the same with Daoism, which acknowledges an afterlife but also stresses that the living should act calmly and reflect on the world.

Comparison with Christianity is more difficult. Although it's up to personal interpretation, we can see that both Christians and Daoists seem to use meditation in the form of prayer and exercise as a way to communicate closer with God, The Dao or simply "The one" and on the whole, most adherents to these religions seem to have no issue with meditation when it comes to reflection on one's own faith and ideas. However, meditation isn't strictly mentioned in the bible, and although evidence does point to what we call "meditation", people can argue they are talking about something completely different (eg: just mindfulness).

On top of this, historically there is also a large divide. Christian meditation can only be dated to the 12th century, while Daoist meditation (if interpreting today's Dao De Jing as correct) dates from about 400 BCE. This means that from a historical perspective it's a lot harder to place the origin of lots of Daoist meditation techniques. Many have been passed down orally from teacher to student for over 2000 years.

Ultimately though, both religions use meditation in the now. Both use meditation to relax and as an aid to deep reflection on their respective teachings. To sum up:

1. Both see meditation in this current cosmic plain as a key for greater understanding of the universe and connection to the works that its followers believe in. For example, the WCCM says that “Firstly, the faith with which you meditate – some sense of personal connection with Jesus.

Secondly, the historical scriptural and theological tradition in which we meditate.”⁸

2. Meditation is a good practice for healthy living. This was most famously demonstrated in Daoist texts from 3 century CE with the “7 Sages of the Bamboo Grove” who via meditation and a happy life.

For these reasons it could be argued that there isn’t much difference between the two faiths when it comes to meditation and a general approach to living an ethical life and self-reflective study of their own holy books.

But they are far from the same when it comes to the relationship between sexuality and religion. Then again, morally the two may not be that common in its message when it comes to meditation since the “7 Sages of the Bamboo Grove” were rumoured to have engaged in sexually explicit behavior to prove the prowess of their meditation techniques when living in exile from the state of Cao Wei.⁹ Mainstream Christianity does not highlight – or, at least, care to highlight - sexual acts for the glory of its God. This is one of the major differences between the two faiths when it comes to meditation. It may also be worth noting that Christianity was

⁸ Unknown, 2015, What is Christian Meditation? WCCM, <http://wccm.org/content/what-meditation>, Date Accessed 8/4/2018

⁹ Bret, 1990, Passions of the Cut Sleeve. University of California Press. pp. 68- 69

in its formative phase during the 3rd century AD at about the same time as the “7 Sages of the Bamboo Grove” showing vastly different methods of a follower’s self - cultivation. However, in today’s world both Christians and Daoists value the help meditation can bring to one’s life and its help in gaining inner strength and greater understanding of one’s faith.

Interpretations of Death and the Afterlife

Like life and meditation, death and the afterlife in both Christianity and Daoism differ greatly. The Bible is far more explicit about the afterlife as seen in “Revelations” which describes which groups are destined for the “lake of fire” and which ones will be rewarded in Heaven. On the other hand Dao De Jing has much less description on the afterlife and more about the current, although that hasn’t stopped Daoists after Laozi describing it. Heaven and Hell both are present in Daoism and Christianity, with Heaven being the ultimate goal for humans to strive for.

Heaven in Daoism is less cosmological than its Christian counterpart. Due to Daoism’s respect and upholding of nature and natural order, Heaven is seen to

manifest itself via our material world.¹⁰ Daoism also shares beliefs with Confucianism and other traditional Chinese folk religions when it comes to *Tian* (天) which is the all-encompassing force that governs human society and everybody's lives. Both Daoists and Confucians believe that once somebody finds their own heavenly "way" (or Dao) they can harness Heaven's power in our current form of existence.¹¹

Due to this "Heaven on Earth" concept of *Tian* Daoists believe that it is best to stay as healthy possible and to achieve immortality. Since at least the 12th century many followers of Daoism have looked to the "8 immortals" (Or Baxian) for guidance.¹² Using this logic we can see that Daoism uses nature and heaven as the same place. Furthermore using Zhuangzi's ideas and attitudes towards life and death Daoism takes on the idea that life and death are not really important at all. In fact it's the same as the day and night cycle or the turning of the seasons.¹³ This is explained in Zhuangzi's famous quote about his dream of being a butterfly.

¹⁰ Zaleski, 2018, Heaven, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/heaven>, Date Accessed 8/4/2018

¹¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, Tian, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tian>, Date Accessed 8/4/2018

¹² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, Tian, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baxian>, Date Accessed 9/4/2018

¹³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, Identity of life and death, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daoism/Ideas-of-knowledge-and-language>, Date Accessed 9/4/2018

"I, Zhuangzi, dreamed I was a butterfly. Suddenly I woke, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dream that I was a butterfly, or Whether now I am a butterfly Dreaming that I'm now a man." - Zhuangzi 2:9¹⁴

Using this quote we can see that Daoism's concept of heaven and current world are almost the same and is nothing to be feared nor valued, it is seen as just another stage the soul will encounter, this could also be seen as a form of reincarnation although it isn't as explicit as Buddhism's belief in the system.

Christianity on the other hand is very different in its approach to understating heaven and the afterlife. It is thought to be a separate plain completely from earth and can only be achieved via submission to God and Jesus Christ. The Bible isn't that explicit on what Heaven is like and is left to humans imagination although being "One with God" is part of their key beliefs.¹⁵ The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches do believe however that a third state exists between Hell or Heaven named "Purgatory", which does not have any analogue in Daoism.

In contrast to Daoism, early Christians in the 1st century AD didn't believe that heaven was a new cosmic realm, but a physical place that would come down to Earth in due course.¹⁶ This is far different from the "other dimension" that Heaven would be in believed by later Christians.

¹⁴ Price, 2010, The way of Confucius, Compendium Publishing LTD, p. 15

¹⁵ Unknown, 2018, Views on Heaven, [christianity.org](https://christianity.org.uk/index.php/a/views-on-heaven-and-hell.php), Christian Enquiry Agency Ltd, <https://christianity.org.uk/index.php/a/views-on-heaven-and-hell.php>, Date Accessed, 9/4/2018

¹⁶ Ehrman, 2006 , Bart. Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend, Oxford University Press, USA. p.10

Hell, or in Chinese *Diyu*, is considered the place where the bad and evil people go after their time on earth in Daoism. *Diyu* isn't unique to Daoism, it's seen both in Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. Although it does not primarily exist in either Daodejing or the Analects. Instead it was most likely carried on into Daoism via Buddhism's arrival in China.¹⁷ This became the idea of the "Ten courts of hell" where evildoers were judged by underworld bureaucracy and sentenced to gruesome punishments until their sins were wiped and then were sent back into the real world to see if they could perform better.¹⁸ Sinners for example would be subject to serve their punishments in real world hellish versions of holy places such as "Mount Tai" (an important religious area in China). These stories were collected in the 19th century the *Jade Register* used to educate Chinese on how to behave and avoid these punishments after death.¹⁹

Hell in Christianity can also be contrasted with Daoism in the sense that it exists as a different plain from our reality, unlike Daoist Heaven that can be achieved on earth. Although like Heaven, Jesus's descriptions of hell are quite vague, it was often compared to Gehenna, which was a rubbish dump outside of Jerusalem. It was also used by certain cults for ritual burning and supposedly in even more ancient times, child sacrifice to the deity Moloch.²⁰ Gehenna was translated into the

¹⁷ Strickmann, 2018, Daoism, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daoism>, Date Accessed 9/4/2018

¹⁸ Yong, 2018, What Are China's Horrific Ten Courts of Hell?, Owlcation, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/The-Horrific-Chinese-Ten-Courts-of-Hell>, Date Accessed 9/4/2018

¹⁹ Spence, 1996, God's Chinese Son, New York, p. 38

²⁰ Editors of New World Encyclopaedia, 2017, Gehenna, New World Encyclopaedia, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gehenna>, Date Accessed 9/4/2018

King James Bible as “Hell” from which many Christians derived their legends of hell, although in analysis of the original text we can find that Jesus was comparing it to a real location on earth.

Although descriptions and locations are not the same it's easy to draw up comparisons to the monotheistic judgement of God and the courts of hell. Both religions seem to stress that after we die we are judged for our actions on earth. Another comparison would be that although both hells are extremely violent, both were only really established as locations in the religions well after their founding. This shows that the original writers of the texts were in fact preaching a much more harmonious message than the one that was later told to the majority of adherents.

In conclusion, how different really is the Christian and Daoist understanding of life and death?

As explained before, Christianity and Daoism differ greatly as belief systems for many reasons, mainly due to background, the fact they were composed in different languages, and even form of the text.

However, both religions do follow a few basic similarities when it comes to life and death. The ideal of peace on earth, via meditation has been present in the Christian

Church since at least the 12th century and part of Daoism since its founding during China's Warring States era, along with cosmological views on the afterlife.

Both religions believe in a Heaven and a Hell, although Daoists believe that through acting with nature and following certain exercises you can achieve a happy life on earth almost akin to a cosmic heaven, while Christians on the whole believe in a heaven on a plain separate from our own. Hell is no different although instead of heaven, Daoists believe that it is hell that is on a different plain. Christian understanding of hell is also very similar along with both their ideas of judgement.

However, both religions only formulated these ideas later on into their canon and the books and ideas later formatted by followers of the faiths are not the same as Laozi's and Jesus's own thoughts as originally presented.

In the end, while the religions do have major differences in their beliefs, they coincide in their teachings of how people should act on earth and what awaits them when they die.

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