Tao Vs. Ren Essay, Research Paper

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Area Studies

There are three major “religions” in China: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism came from India, but the other two originated in China. This is a comparison between those two religions. In modern times there are lots of people that try to maintain a balance between the three, but this has not always been the case. There have been times when the followers of one religion were persecuted by the people of another religion. Coming into this report, I knew basically nothing about the topics that I chose to discuss, which has made this an educational experience for me. Most of the books on Taoism in the library were gone, so I had to settle for the information that I could get from books on general Chinese philosophy, so my knowledge in this area is not as specialized as it is for Confucianism, but I think that it will still allow me to write an informed comparison of the two. With no further ado, I bring you the comparison between Taoism and Confucianism.

Taoism and Confucianism are similar in several ways. They were both founded within the same period of time, and in fact, the two founders supposedly met in 518 BC, when Confucius went to Lao Tzu, who was at the time the curator of royal archives, and studied ancient ceremonies with him. They both believed in the importance of names, Lao Tzu saying that having a name is the difference between existence and non existence, and Confucius thinking that all would become chaos if the names were not straightened so that objects were actually what their names implied. “A square vase that is not square- square vase indeed!”(Leys, 27), which refers to a type of pot called a gu which means square pot in Chinese, but which had evolved so that it was not square anymore. Confucius and Lao Tzu agreed on things, such as the necessity of maintaining rituals and ceremonies, and they both thought that there was an orderly connection between nature, people, and heaven. Taoism believes in nonviolence, and although Confucius once said that the army was one of the three most important parts of the state, he also said that it would be the part that he gave up if he was forced to give up one of the three. Confucianism and Taoism have many things in common, but it seems that most of these are not in the actual philosophy of the religion, but more in the fact that they originated in the same time period, and therefore are related in more common beliefs of the era.

There are many important differences between the religions. The most prominent of these is the fact that Confucianism is not really a religion. It was created as a political philosophy, and Confucius always thought of himself as a politician, not a teacher. Confucius always avoided talking about supernatural events and religious beliefs, which makes him look sometimes like an atheist, but he has several lines that contradict this. He said that his avoidance of these issues is not a disbelief of them, but a type of reverence for them. At the same time he said to keep the supernatural away from everyday life. Taoism on the other hand starts off by addressing the supernatural, and is in fact centered around spirituality and the supernatural. Confucius set out to write things on his thoughts, and made several books, but Lao Tzu only wrote one, which he was persuaded to do by a friend who did not want Lao’s thoughts to be lost when Lao receded into seclusion.

Confucius spent most of his life traveling, looking for someone in power at the time that was also enlightened enough to see the value in the Confucian teachings. He considered his life a failure, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Lao Tzu, on the other hand, spent his life working, and although he may not have been content with the life that he had, he also did not try very hard to change it. Lao Tzu had a job in the government, which Confucius also had for a time, but Confucius found that he could not change anything from there, so he left and started traveling, looking for a faster rout to having his ideas implemented. Lao Tzu had the patience to wait for a while and advance to an important position, which was hard for Confucius to do because he could see the government leading itself to collapse around him.

The central ideas in Confucianism are filial piety and ren, and the central concept in Taoism is Tao. Filial piety is about the relationships that you have with other people, and how in order for life to be good in society, it needs to be good within the family. Confucius emphasizes five major relationships that of sovereign and subject, parent and child, elder and younger brother, husband and wife and friend and friend. He also talks about ren, which means something like goodness or empathy. It was the supreme aspect that you should aspire to, and it was necessary to be a gentleman. In Taoism, the Tao is something that guides our movements in a natural way, without really controlling them. Lao Tzu was of the opinion that the more laws there are, the more criminals there will be. He also thought that the perfect society was made up of uneducated people, sort of the ignorance is bliss theory. He said to repay hatred with kindness. In these respects Confucius and Lao Tzu were the most different. “Someone inquired: What do you think of ‘requiting injury with kindness’? Confucius said “How then do you requite kindness? requite injury with justice and kindness with kindness”(National Geographic, 167). This shows some of Confucius’s thought on the teachings of Lao Tzu. They also probably would have argued about filial piety, and Confucius would have been angered by the ignorance is bliss idea, because although there are things that should come before knowledge, Confucius thought that studying was and important part of society.

Confucius was very concerned with the society at the time of his life. He believed he could see the end of all organization coming, and when he was denied the chance to help the government, he felt that his life was a failure. Some of the things that distressed him the most were people ignoring “the ritual”. This is to say that they did things that tradition and law said they couldn’t. He was bothered to no end by rich powerful people doing things that are supposedly reserved only for the ruler. He thought that the government or the locals in the area of the rich person should do something to stop the person from ruining the ritual, which would save society from anarchy. Confucius urged the withdrawal from public life when things were not going so well, and he also emphasized the importance of having a family that you could withdraw into. I am not sure of the opinions of Lao Tzu on issues like these, but I don’t think that they bothered him nearly as much as they did Confucius. The Taoist is known to retreat from the world as a way of self preservation, which I would guess is not in accordance with the ritual of Confucius, who only encouraged temporary withdrawal until any trouble that you may be experiencing blows over. This is not going to help with the preservation of society, simply on individual.

Although I mainly emphasized the differences between the two, Taoism and Confucianism are probably more similar than they are dissimilar. The problem with this is that because both of the founders lived during the same period, they both had to deal with the same problems, and they most likely had many shared characteristics ingrained in their personalities by the society of the times. Because of this, the similarities are generally not that interesting, while the differences are. Although I focused mainly on Confucianism, many of the things that I did not give a contrasting Taoist opinion on are probably similarities between the two. Also, the amount of information that needs to be read in order to understand the two religions is so huge that studying all of the differences in the few weeks since I chose my topic would have been next to impossible, even if someone hadn’t checked out most of the Taoist books from the library. I regret that I didn’t choose a topic sooner so that I could have had more time to do the research that was really needed. In closing I would just like to say that if you ever plan to research Confucius, the things that he actually wrote are much more interesting than anything written about him by another person (except for maybe translations), and you can generally get as much good information from him as you can from anyone else.

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