

THE MYSTICISM OF LAO-TZE.

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IN books dealing with the religions of China the words "mystic," "mystical," and the like, frequently appear near the name of Lao-tze. Usually no further explanation is made, and the reader is left to deduce his own conclusions. The object of this exceedingly brief, and therefore crude, paper is to arrive at a more definite understanding of what lies beneath such vague and much abused terminology.

William James says that there is no personal religious experience which does not have its roots in mystical states of consciousness.² Dependable data about the life of Lao-tze are lacking, so it is impossible to make any extended observations about his religious experience. What data we do have, however, combined with the small deposit of his thought in the *Tao Teh King*, point clearly toward such experience and can be called mystical. In fact, it is doubtful if Lao-tze can be fully intelligible apart from this interpretation.

Environment always has a great deal to do with the appearance of various types of people and thought. Especially is this true of mystics. Wherever there is chaos and distress, persons tend to seek internal adjustment rather than external adjustment, so that some degree of certainty and comfort may be secured. A reconciliation of opposed and antagonistic factors is sought in the mind for the sake of peace. The outside world offers no substantial support, consequently the disturbed person seeks security elsewhere; generally in what is thought to be the groundwork of all things.

Lao-tze lived in a situation that produces such adjustment. His life and work were at the Imperial Court in Chau. Corruption apparently prevailed there. Men were incessantly using evil means to secure selfish ends. The dynasty itself was rapidly decaying. Elaborate ceremonialism and externalism were crushing the cherished qualities of human relationship. Historic fact reveals this and the internal evidence of the *Tao Teh King* manifests some such conditions. Various passages obviously could not have been written unless the government was bad, unless men were more interested

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² *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 379.

in achieving their own ambitions than aiding good government. Then, there are references to the past state of man when he was simple and pure, and lived in harmony with Tao; and these are, more often than not, an indication of untidy affairs.³ He meditated upon its nature and produced a mysticism not fully developed.

Like many Christian mystics, when faced by intolerable conditions, Lao-tze found a simple solution. He said, "Get into harmony with Tao," while they said, "Get into harmony with God." At bottom both suggestions are really of the same experiential stuff. "Get into harmony" is the sum and substance of the teachings, all else is but an expansion of this fundamental principle.

The very simplicity of the principle has made it terrifying to some minds. No wonder Confucius with his insatiable love of detail and organization was bewildered by his conference with the old master. Too many have expected abstruse metaphysics to be hidden in the sayings of Lao-tze and frequently have made obvious remarks become profound utterances. The conciseness and brevity of the *Tao Teh King* have added to the confusion, but the five thousand characters in the little book are really repeating the same thoughts constantly. However, the well-known stiffness of the language has naturally compelled the finer aspects of mystical knowledge to receive poor expression. Moreover, the mystic's delight in paradox was not wanting in Lao-tze, for he says himself, "Words that are strictly true seem to be paradoxical."⁴ And the lack of emotional phraseology so usually characteristic of religious minds further complicates, strangely enough, the effort to penetrate the nature of his ideas and feelings.

Be this as it may, however, he repeats a familiar phrase of the mystics when he says, "He who knows the Tao does not care to speak about it; and he who is ever ready to speak about it does not know it" (56, 1), and frightens many away from trying to understand what is really meant by knowing the Tao. Lao-tze himself, nevertheless, immediately proceeds in the attempt to describe the knowledge. He dispels any fear of complexity by saying that his doctrine is very easy and simple to know and to practise; but adds that it is just because of this that "no one in the world" seems able to grasp it (53, 2; 70, 1). There is an originating and all-comprehending principle that expresses itself in immutable law. To penetrate this is to be at ease. The principle, of course, is Tao. It is the source and root of all creation. Its power

³ Legge's translation, *Sacred Books of the East*, Chapters 17, 19, 62, 65, 80.

⁴ Legge's translation, *loc. cit.*, Chapter 78, 4.

is endless and eternal. It silently and modestly produces and nourishes being. "What there was before the universe was Tao. Tao makes things what they are, but it is not itself a thing. Nothing can produce, yet everything has Tao within it, and continues to produce it without end." Thus it is absolute, and like the Absolute generally in mystical utterance, is inscrutable to sense-perception (21), or to man's worldly knowledge (20, 1), or to any of his ways of reasoning. It cannot be named and any attempt to name or describe it will end in incompleteness. Man's supreme concern, however, is to seek it, for if he finds it, every besetting problem will be solved. It will be an ever present help in time of trouble. It is the root, the essence of life, and if one can reach it, all will be well. He will be "helping the natural development of all things" (64, 4), and this development is good. Lao-tze's problem was also that of the Western mystics.

To know the Tao, everything that is opposed to its way of action is swept aside. Every barrier standing between the person and the Great One is broken down. Undivided attention is given to it. The imagination is cleansed and becomes without flaw (10, 1). The impure is completely overcome. Acts that damage the best qualities in life are forgotten. Thoughts resulting in unethical effects are purged out. The mind is purified. An elimination of the bad takes place, so that the good alone is existent. This is simplification—a point that Lao-tze stresses. It is returning to the root, to primordial stillness. It is the abolition of man's destructive ways and the substitution of Tao's constructive ways (74, 2). And Tao is absolutely virtuous, being the source of virtue.

But Tao contains the best ethical wisdom of the Chinese in the sixth century B. C. It is synthesized and functions as a unit. Thus, the mind by concentrating attention upon the good as a lump, naturally crowds out the bad, and moral action is an obvious resultant. There is a repeated accumulation of the precious attributes of the Tao, and with this accumulation every obstacle of the return to Tao's simplicity is subjugated (59, 2).

Those who try to hold Tao in their grasp lose it (29, 1), maintains Lao-tze. They are exerting their own wills and are not letting Tao act. Instead, they must become passive so that the great principle can use them completely. They renounce all. They become dead; only Tao is alive. Striving ceases in the ordinary sense of it (15, 3-4). Tao comes and uses you. The mind and body work and move, but your self is gone. Tao is using your self and thereby your body and mind. You stop being full of your self.

It has nothing to do. It is quiet, still, in "a condition of rest." You become possessed by the Great One; it permeates you, unhampered by your desires. Your will does not move (64, 4). You are nothing but a passive instrument of Tao's ceaseless beneficent action. You possess no will nor purpose of your own; you have emptied yourself of all desire (37, 3); you have discarded *your* benevolence and *your* righteousness (19, 1). Simplification has taken place. You continue diminishing and diminishing until you arrive at a condition of being wherein you do nothing on purpose (48, 2). The state of emptiness, of hollowness, of non-action, of humility has been attained. Now there is nothing which you yourself can do, yet there is nothing which you do not do (48, 2); that is, Tao has seized you and works out everything through the instrumentality of you. You are at one with Tao, the Absolute. "This is," says William James, "the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by difference of clime or creed."⁵

This elimination of *self-will* naturally bred a tendency toward the ascetic in Lao-tze, the same as it has in so many mystics. The pleasures of the senses are not highly respected, for they are likely to lead a person away from Tao. They are inclined to replace the immaterial by the material, and it is the former that have worth (53). Lao-tze, however, does not carry asceticism to a point of disease. What he really wishes is moderation (59, 1). The wants of the body must neither be suppressed nor allowed to become rampant but satisfied simply. They must not intervene between the person and Tao.

The effort to attain harmony and be at one with Tao does not seem to be marked by what is frequently called "the dark night of the soul." The sufferings of heart and body that have characterized the writings of some mystics do not show forth clearly in the *Tao Tsch King*. The scourging of self does not appear. There is no elaborately planned process of the successive steps to be taken before knowing the Tao. If you do not know it, there is pain and suffering and corruption. If you do know it, these evil things fade into nothingness. Concentrate on their opposites, was Lao-tze's only suggestion. Like his people, he was too pragmatic and practical to let sensitiveness develop fully within him. Moreover, his asceticism did not renounce the body to the extent that unsatisfied passion would aid "dark nights of suffering". It is evident that he was not forced to find sexual gratification by any other means than the customary. He says that Tao proceeds by contraries (49, 1), and

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 419.

this might let one infer that there were periods of fatigue and recuperation, of rise and fall, of exhilaration and depression, or what many like to call rhythm, in Lao-tze's experience. But the inference would be weakly supported. He is stingy in this aspect of mystical consciousness. It belongs to those who are more autobiographical and introspective.

After a person has come to know the Tao, however, the effects are very bountiful. In Chapter 54, Lao-tze says:

"Tao when nursed within one's self
His vigor will make true:
And where the family it rules
What riches will accrue!
The neighborhood where it prevails
In thriving will abound;
And 'tis seen throughout the state.
Good fortune will be found.
Employ it the kingdom o'er,
And men will thrive all around."

Evidently the experiencing of Tao energizes one to action. Actual quietism, so often connected with Lao-tze, is wanting. There is, as has been said before, inaction and passivity on the part of a person's will, but this really was only an unconscious means to still greater ends. Evelyn Underhill's contention that mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical,⁶ goes well with Lao-tze's attitude. He continually talks of worldly and governmental affairs, and how one possessed by Tao conducts himself in them. As in the case of St. Catherine of Siena and Ignatius Loyola, the knowing of the Great Source apparently resulted in greater spendings of energy, in giving oneself still more to work. And the more one gives, the more he has (81, 2). Consequently, there is little contemplation and meditation for their own sake. Tangible results, the creation of a better social life, is the main object—a social life, of course, that to us means backwardness. Mental peace produces such, as a seed produces fruit.

To achieve this result, Lao-tze does nothing more than call right action the action of Tao. He suppresses the lower side of man's nature and lets the upper side function alone. The best experience of his race, the general will or mind replacing the individual will or mind, naturally has powerful effect. At the risk of modernizing, one might say that perhaps Lao-tze blindly recognized this when he wrote: "The sage has no invariable mind of his own; he

⁶ *Mysticism*, p. 96.

makes the mind of his people his mind" (49, 1). Leuba's formula,⁷ that mystical death is a functional anesthesia falling upon particular regions of consciousness, applies well here. The evils and pains born of governmental life are subjected to death. They are ignored and the position they formerly held in the mind becomes empty, as it were, and is occupied by the good, by the pure—Tao.

To have comfort in the mind and in the government, Lao-tze proposed the reform measure of having the sage or king and those under him possessed by the Tao (37). This had been experienced by him and consequently was concrete and firm, but, to the ordinary person, it was vague and ambiguous. The knowing of Tao makes it possible for one to direct affairs, to be skilful at saving men and guiding them in the way of perpetual unity and peace (27, 1). Man's knowledge must not rule the State, because that is the reason for its pitiful condition, but Tao's knowledge must rule (65). This is a sure guarantee of health. When Lao-tze uses such a phrase as "be stupid," he means be stupid in the way of man but not in the way of Tao. To be a fool before men is to be wise with Tao (20). A skilful master of Tao has a penetration so exquisite and deep that it eludes men's knowledge (15, 1). He is able, therefore, to govern a State efficiently. He has given himself up to the natural development of things—Tao—and hence cannot fail. He is ruling with a greatness not his own.

It is in the references to the Tao that the unmistakable signs of mysticism emerge. The very opening sentences of the *Tao Teh King* reveal that quality of mystical experience that James calls "ineffability." And it continues finding expression throughout the book. "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. Conceived of as having no name, it is the originator of heaven and earth." Or,

"Who can of Tao the nature tell?
Our sight it flies, our touch as well,
Eluding sight, eluding touch..." (21).

It is an impossibility to give a name or discover the precise nature of this power over all. Speech cannot carry knowledge of it. Even he who knows it cannot talk about it (56, 1). Lao-tze attempts, however, to give a description of the experiencing of the Absolute, the Tao.

⁷ "The State of Death," *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. XIV.

"The Tao when brightest seen, seems light to lack;

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Its greatest beauty seems to offend the eyes;

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Loud is its sound, but never word it said. . . ." (41).

Like all mystics struggling to outline this experience, he is forced to use symbolic language. Yet this is inadequate and does not catch the flavor. Tao remains hidden and indescribable (41, 3). It is bright, still it is not bright; that is, brightness is not large or great enough to express what is known and felt. Its beauty is likewise beyond language. The harmony is complete and so perfect that it hurts. The experience is more than that of perception, or of conception. It is feeling perfect unity (14, 1). The disharmonious and the discontinuous have been eliminated by simplification and a bundle or lump of like sentiments seize the mind at once. There is a perfect fit among them all. It is the glory of the mind functioning without collision. "It is a way of being." It is knowing eternity in time.

By this experience Lao-tze believed that he had penetrated the secret of being, that he had reached a knowledge greater than that of learned men. Tao was the source of virtue and he had reached it. People were too interested in the by-ways and hence were led away from the stillness and simplicity that is true knowledge (20-21). Obviously this aspect of the experience James would call "noetic," and others would call it illuminative.

This kind of experience is the culmination of the mystic's efforts. It is the goal that is sought and cherished. Lao-tze apparently reached it but he did not linger about it the same as the usual mystic. He caught a glimpse of what he believed to be Reality but did not let all his energy be absorbed in the sight. It was the conception of Tao as impersonal and not personal that undoubtedly had something to do with Lao-tze not laying greater stress upon the experiencing of the Tao itself. To him Tao was thought of as highly ethical and not as a person possessing some desirable attributes. This eliminated the high coloring and beauty in language common to the West where God has been conceived as personal and where Jesus and the Virgin Mary exist. In Lao-tze's teaching the sex-instinct was not suppressed but moderated, hence the lack of embellishing phrases, and the constant hovering near the object of desire. Moreover, he was much interested in the use to which the possession of the Tao could be put. He says, "The use of Tao is

inexhaustible." He does not become greatly elated over Tao as a thing in itself but rather in the results that Tao can produce. Tao tends to be sought more as a means to an end than as an end. Christian mystics have made union with God the supreme thing, while Lao-tze has tended to negate this end by gazing too long at the valuable results of the union. It is this tendency that makes his mysticism more or less imperfect. Furthermore, while he sought internal peace he did at the same time seek to use this peace as an instrument to attain external peace. Consequently the subjectivism and introspection of a fully developed mystical system is wanting. "Inwardmindedness" was recognized (47) but it had little chance to express itself. And it is the lack of this quality that accounts for no extended remarks on the way one follows to attain Tao. A description of the successive steps to the union are clearly absent, likewise the experience during the ascension of these steps—the dark nights. Lao-tze hints at this quality but nowhere gives a description. It is the absence of these things that leads to the conclusion that Lao-tze developed an imperfect mysticism.

BOOK REVIEWS.

AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY. By *H. P. Farrell*. London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917. Pp. vii, 220. Price 3s. 6d. net.

This is a short text-book whose purpose, as the author states in the Preface, is to explain to the beginner the nature of political philosophy, "and then to lead the student gently on to the study of the classical writers by presenting to him an epitome of their ideas with such explanatory comments and criticisms as are deemed necessary." The author expounds at some length the political views of Plato and Aristotle, the social-contract theorists, and the analytical and historical schools of political philosophy. He indulges not only in exposition but also in criticism. A list of books for further reading is provided and there is a good index. For the purposes stated in its title, this little book may be recommended as quite useful. Δ