Religion

Multiple Participation versus Exclusionism

In my discussion of Confucian filial morality in chapter 5, I have briefly touched the religious dimension of Confucianism. Religion, defined in a broad sense, is important in all societies and occupies a crucial place in all cultures. Studying a cultural philosophy such as Confucianism without enquiring into the religious dimension would be inadequate. In this chapter I will focus on the religious dimension of Confucianism and its relationship with two other Chinese ethicoreligious systems, Taoism and Buddhism. I will show a fundamental difference between the Chinese and the Western practice of religion. I hope such a study will pave our way to chapter 7 on the relationship between Confucianism and democracy.

For many people in the West, a person's religious affiliation is a matter of total commitment; choosing one religion implies one's being excluded from other religions. A religious person is either affiliated with religion A or religion non-A, not both. One is either a Christian or a non-Christian, for example, a Judaist. Within the Christian tradition, one is either Catholic or Protestant. If a person of one affiliation wants to be affiliated with another, he or she must be converted to the latter, leaving the former behind. Although there
are ecumenical conferences and organizations, few people are ecumenical or interfaithful across different religions. People in the West may think this characteristic is one of being religious itself.

Can a person integrate two or more distinct religions into one’s life? Our exploration into multicultural coexistence must answer this question. The issue is not whether one can integrate or combine elements of various religions together to make up a new religion, which is certainly possible and has been done. It is rather a matter of subscribing to different religions by the same individual without being converted from one religion to another. The renowned theologian Hans Küng called this question of “dual citizenship in faith,” or more appropriately, as I will discuss in this chapter, it is rather “multicitizenship in faith.”

In recent years, along with the multiculturalism movement there has been debate among Western theologians about religious pluralism and religious diversity. For example, in support of his position of religious pluralism, John Hick, one of the most prominent contemporary Western theologians, recently quoted from the Tao Te Ching and embraced the idea that “the Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.” For him, this means that the Ultimate Reality or Truth can never be adequately expressed and grasped by humans. Hick proposes that a distinction be made between, on the one hand, the transcendent Ultimate and, on the other, a plurality of masks or faces or manifestations of this Ultimate “as Jahweh, as God the Father, as the Qur’anic Allah, as Brahman, as the dharmakaya, and so on.” The transcendent Ultimate cannot be directly expressed or grasped in any particular religion. For Hick this distinction is analogous to the one “between the [Kantian] noumenal Transcendent or Real or Ultimate, and its plurality of phenomenal manifestations within human consciousness.” Accordingly, every one of the (major) religious traditions can be true, yet none has the ultimate truth. While this understanding appears to open a door for multiple religious participation, Hick indicates a distaste:

While wholehearted devotion to a single religion has been considered a virtue in the West, it is not clear why Hick would hold such a position, given his belief that no single religion has the whole truth.

Hick’s distaste for multiple religious participation is, of course, not untypical among Western theologians. Hans Küng maintains that one can hold multicitizenship culturally and ethically, but not religiously. He claims that “even with every cultural and ethical possibility for integration, the truth of every religion extends to a depth that ultimately challenges every person to a yes or no, to an either-or.” Therefore, “a religious dual citizenship in the deepest, strictest sense of faith should be excluded—by all the great religions.”

One may be able to find support for this kind of exclusionism from the scriptures. In the Bible, for instance, the first of the Ten Commandments is “You must have no other god besides me”:

God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You must have no other god besides me. You must not make a carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them in worship; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me.” (Exodus 20)

This passage clearly demands a total devotion to one single god from the worshippers. If a worshipper of this god is to follow these words, he or she cannot but reject all other gods. Of course, for such a person, this god is not just a god; it is the god, or simply, God.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the idea of multiple religious participation has been rejected almost entirely in Western religious communities. As John H. Berthrong observed, “For most Christians, that people can belong to more than one community of faith seems at best confusing and at worst, damning.”

However, exclusionism certainly is not characteristic of religion per se. A recent article on Buddhism in USA Today specifically points out that “Buddhists can be involved in other religions.” As a matter of fact, as I will show, “multicitizenship” in religion for the Chinese is nothing new but a part of everyday life.

We have to ask concerning these primary affirmations whether they conflict with each other. They conflict in the sense that they are different and one can only centre one’s religious life wholeheartedly and unambiguously upon one of them... but not more than one at once.
My purpose here is to enhance mutual understanding between the West and the East on this matter by showing how the Chinese practice of religion is different from that of most Westerners. For this purpose, my task is not merely to point out a fact or to present a historical example in this matter, rather it is to help Westerners make at least some sense of the Chinese practice of multiple religious participation. I will show that in the Chinese culture there is a fairly harmonious interplay between the three major religions—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This interplay is not only in society as a whole, but in individuals as well.

The question I attempt to answer here, then, is, how multiculti- nship across these religions is possible: How can a person be a Taoist-Confucian? How can a person be a Buddhist-Confucian? How can a person be a Taoist-Buddhist? or even, How can a person be a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian? Here I do not differentiate between being a Taoist-Confucian and being a Confucian-Taoist, and so forth, even though there might be some differences. My concern is rather how the two or three can come together in one person. For the sake of simplicity, I will discuss these questions under one title: “How can a person be a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian?”

The Religiousness of Chinese Religions

Even though without a god in the strict sense, the relig-

iousness of the Chinese religion has seldom been ques-

tioned.

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[In China] a person can be a Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist more or less at the same time. But this is a question slightly different from syncretism per se. It is more properly the question of dual or multiple membership.\(^{38}\)

Here Berthrong, of course, is using "membership" metaphorically, for none of the three religions in China is strictly a membership religion. Let us now turn to this Chinese multiple "membership" way of being religious.

**Being Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian**

Now, how can the same person be a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian? The question here is not merely whether the same individual can pay tribute to a Taoist temple today and participate in a Buddhist ceremony tomorrow. It is rather how the same individual can subscribe to three different value systems in a persistent and sensible way.

We can understand this practice in two ways: (1) multiple religious participation based on a person's multiple dimensions of existence, and (2) dialectical coexistence within the same dimension of one's existence.

First, as discussed earlier, the three religions occupy different dimensions of a person's life and perform different functions. Since a person has more than one dimension in life, one can incorporate different religions. By Xiao Zong's model, a person can have the peace of mind of a Buddhist, take good care of his physical well-being like a Taoist, and be a good citizen as a Confucian. A person may go on pilgrimage to the mercy goddess Guanyin 觀音 at a Buddhist monastery in order to have an heir, invite a Taoist master to help get evil spirits out of his home, and ask Confucius to bless his loved one or to help his daughter get into a top university.

The renowned Chinese historian Chen Yinke 陈寅恪 (1890–1969) observed that, "those who outwardly observe Confucian norms may inwardly follow the principles of Buddhism or cultivate themselves according to the way of Taoism; there is no conflict between them."\(^{39}\)

A contemporary exemplar of the "Buddhist-Confucian" was Liang Shu-ming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988). Liang was a major Confucian in this century, spending most of his life practicing and reviving Confucianism, but he himself also claimed that his whole life belonged to Buddhism.\(^{40}\) In Liang's final years he maintained that he was still a Buddhist while he also accepted the title "the Last Confucian."\(^{41}\) Many people have been perplexed by this apparent discrepancy. How is this possible? Liang was after two different issues in his life. One was the ideal of life, a question of personal existence; the other was the problem of China's future, which demands a social solution to its modern predicaments. These two problems were intertwined in Liang and he was so troubled that he attempted suicide at the age of nineteen.\(^{42}\) As an individual, he found meaning of life in Buddhism; as a citizen he found that the only solution to China's modern predicaments was Confucianism.\(^{43}\)

The way of multiple religious participation in the multiple dimensions of one's existence is not all there is to multiple religious practice. Different religions operate in the same dimension of one's life and thus create tension between one another. I suggest that, in the second way, there is a dialectical tension/complementary relation between these religions that is far more important in understanding the complementarity of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

A Confucian scholar has said that Buddhism is like floating on the water, drifting wherever the current takes you, and Confucianism is like having a rudder in the boat to guide it in a certain direction.\(^{44}\) This simile was meant to show the advantage or superiority of Confucianism over Buddhism. But if we read it from a different perspective with an open mind, we can find new meanings. Is it always so bad drifting along with the current? Perhaps it is better to drift for a while before using the rudder again. Sometimes it may be better to follow both ways alternately. Reading the simile this way may help us understand how one can employ both Confucianism and Buddhism.

How can Taoism fit into this scenario? Taoism may be best understood in this picture as using the force of the current to determine and follow the desired direction. For the Taoist, it would be foolish to fight the current head-on. He would make the current work to his advantage; in this case, moving him towards his destiny.

Even though it is not a simple matter for a person to act like a Taoist, a Buddhist, and a Confucian simultaneously at every moment, the three can work in the same person. One example is the famous Chinese poet Tao Qian 陶潜 (陶淵明 Tao Yuanming, 365–427 C.E.). Tao Qian was a Confucian, but his Taoist conviction made
it possible for him to quit the post of the magistrate of Pengze county for a simple life close to nature and to write the poetry that few of his contemporaries could really appreciate. As Donald Holzman points out, Tao Qian’s great achievement describes a complex but original attitude toward life and toward the world in general; this attitude “enabled him to remain faithful to traditional values of loyalty and respect for the social order while realizing . . . a new kind of fulfillment of his ambitions in retirement.” The traditional values of loyalty and respect for social order were undoubtedly Confucian values, while the Taoist attitude in him made it possible for Tao Qian to fulfill life away from society. Zhang Longxi comments:

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism . . . are not incompatible with one another in Chinese culture, and it would be pointless to argue that Tao Qian’s thinking is exclusively Confucian or Taoist. He never had to choose between those different schools of thought but was able to incorporate, as so many Chinese intellectuals have done throughout the centuries, the various elements into a healthy eclectic outlook. In that very eclecticism the Chinese mind is able to keep itself open to the different possibilities of thinking.

Without entering Tao Qian’s mind or having his personal account, it may be difficult for some people to see how Confucianism and Taoism were incorporated in him. I will offer another way, more familiar to Westerners. Suppose you are the coach of a basketball team. Your Confucian mind will take the job of coaching seriously. You want to win. You inspire your players to be confident of winning and give them a strong motivation or desire to win. You make your players practice hard. But that is not enough. You need to study not only the strength of your team, but, perhaps more important, the weaknesses of your opponents. By applying the Taoist idea of wu-wei, you may be able to turn their strength into a weakness and make it work to your advantage. You may also want to give individual players more room for their own growth, let them find their unique place in following the flow of the world. After the game is over, either win or lose, your Buddhist mind (and perhaps Taoist mind as well) will remind you that you should not make a big deal of it. If you lose, you should not feel too bad about it. If you win, it is not a big deal either. After all, it is only a game.

However, this is not to say that as long as a person uses alternately the three life attitudes she must be a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian. It is not so simple. Whether a person practices a way of life religiously does not depend on individual actions. It depends on the larger picture in which a person lives her life. It depends on the significance a person attaches to her actions. Specifically, it depends on the connections she makes between her chosen attitudes and actions on the one hand and the fundamental values in life within the culture on the other. Just as one can eat bread and drink wine without being a Christian communicant, one can do things in ways similar to the Taoist without being a Taoist, similar to the Buddhist without being a Buddhist, and similar to the Confucian without being a Confucian. However, if one makes the fundamental connections and thereby consciously makes one’s actions a religious practice, one is being religious. If one consciously chooses to follow the Taoist, the Buddhist, and the Confucian ways of life alternately or even simultaneously, one is a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian.

I am not suggesting this is the only way for the three to come together. They can function in various ways in the everyday world. On the one hand, one needs to take things seriously and work hard, that is, to be conscientious. On the other, it is important not to go against the current. It is also important to relax and enjoy peace of mind. In my opinion, when a person is growing up, she should probably practice more Confucianism. It will give her the motivation and driving force to learn and develop her potential fully. After she is ready for and enters real life in society, she should practice more Taoism. Together with the skills and knowledge learned in her early years, Taoist strategies will enhance her career. After she becomes old, she should practice more Buddhism. In order to have a good later life, she should not be overburdened by the success or failure of her early years. With a mind of emptiness, she will be able to be at peace with herself.

A good combination of all three is most desirable. Of course, all three cannot interplay in a harmonious and beneficial way unless one masters some kind of practical wisdom (phronēsis), to borrow Aristotle’s terminology, unless one knows when and how to choose
between and among them. The issue of practical wisdom, however, is beyond the present scope of my discussion.

**Some Philosophical Considerations**

One may think that the Chinese can practice more than one religion because their religions are not comprehensive. Obviously, each of the three religions covers some aspects of life more than other aspects; therefore they need to complement one another. In comparison, one may think that a religion like Christianity is comprehensive; it includes all that a person needs for a fulfilling religious life. However, this observation has only limited truth and it does not do enough justice to the real issue.

While different religions share substantial common values, each has its own configuration in assigning value to various aspects of human life. To assign a value to an aspect of life is to emphasize and hence to give some kind of priority to that aspect of life. It is logically as well as practically impossible to give priority to all aspects. In this sense, no particular religion can claim absolute comprehensiveness and every religion has its limitations. The Confucian may find that Christianity fails to give adequate emphasis to reverence to one’s ancestors and parents, while the Christian may think that he has already given enough and there is no need for more reverence, not that he is missing something important. On the other hand, the Christian may find Confucianism wanting in regard to the afterlife, while the Confucian would think that there is just no need and no legitimate ground for that. The typical Christian may find Christianity providing comprehensive guidance to a meaningful life; a Confucian Christian (one who embraces both) would appeal to Confucianism to make up what she feels is missing with respect to reverence to her ancestors and parents.

The real issue is not one of comprehensiveness, but one of value; different people have different values at the same time, and the same people may have different values at different times. That is the real reason for the Chinese multiple religious practice.

What, then, is the philosophical foundation for Chinese multiple religious participation? I think the foundation can be found in all three traditions. One psychological obstacle for multiple religious participation is a strong holding to a fixed self, which is lacking in all three religions. The Buddhist believes that the self is unreal and insubstantial. The Taoist advocates a “waterlike” attitude. Lao Zi said “the sage does not have a fixed mind.” The Buddhist and Taoist would see no problem mingling with other religions.

Among the three religions, Confucianism has appeared to be the least open to multiple religious participation. On the one hand, Confucianism enjoyed a predominant status because of its affiliation with the state during most of its history, and it did not want to give that up. On the other hand, some Confucian doctrines value unity rather than plurality. Nevertheless, there have been elements within Confucianism in favor of flexibility and plurality. For example, Confucius said that “the gentleman is not an implement (器 qi/chi).” An implement is something fixed, unchanging, and inflexible. The idea of not being an implement leaves room for flexibility to incorporate other things, including Taoism and Buddhism. Confucius even said that he held an attitude of “wu ke wu buke” (无不可无不可 “It’s okay if okay, and it’s okay if not okay”), toward various ways of life. For the Chinese people who like multiple religious participation, these ideas were good enough for them to justify their practice.

Human psychology is not a unitary process. It may need different things and take different courses under different circumstances and at different times. This characteristic of the Chinese mind is well illustrated in Archie. J. Bahn’s comparison of the Western, Indian, and Chinese attitudes toward activity and passivity. Bahn observes that while Europeans encourage activity, Hindus encourage passivity, Chinese accept the need for both activity and passivity, each in turn. He explicates:

Why accept both activity and passivity, each in turn? Observe everyday experience. There is a time to arise and a time to go to bed, a time to work and a time to rest. The sun rises, and the sun sets. Initiation of activity is symbolized by yang. Completion of activity or rather achieving of passivity is symbolized by yin. Every being (tao) consists of both yang and yin. . . . Being and doing are equally important, equally natural, equally good.

The Chinese have a tendency to strive for a balance by harmonizing different aspects of things. They tend to let each aspect have its turn
and thus, instead of mixing them together, let them alternately work together. In the Chinese mind, since different religions have different strengths and weaknesses, they may play different roles in the same person’s life.52

Conceptually and philosophically, both Confucianism and Taoism believe in the Way as the Tai Ji (太极 Great Ultimate), which literally means the highest or greatest utmost. The highest utmost cannot be exhausted by a single teaching. Therefore, the Taoists believe in following two or more courses at the same time. Zhuang Zi suggested that the Tao may be found in all philosophical schools.53 The Confucian classic The Doctrine of the Mean states that several courses can be pursued without conflict.54 Confucius believed that different paths may lead to the same destination.55 When Buddhism was first introduced to China, it was put in the language familiar and congenial to Confucianism and Taoism.56 Therefore, regardless of the apparent discrepancies between the three religious doctrines, scholars could incorporate all three into the Way with relatively little difficulty. After all, no one can claim to have exhausted the Way.

Now, one may want to ask: How can one believe in different things? What about truth? The point here seems to be that, if A is true, then non-A has to be false. If you believe in A, you cannot at the same time rationally believe in non-A. If you and I disagree, we cannot both be right. As has been discussed in chapter 2, here perhaps lies one of the greatest differences between the Chinese and the Western mind. The Chinese do not regard semantic truth as highly as Westerners. As Chad Hansen puts it, Chinese moral theories have “the requirement that our utterance be appropriate as opposed to being [semantically] true.” As a matter of fact, the requirement for appropriateness is not limited to language; it is a requirement for human behavior in general, including religious practice. Even in religion, the Chinese have never assigned an unconditional value to semantic truth as has been done in the West. Therefore, they did not need a Nietzsche to ask the question astonishing to most Westerners, “What is the good/value of [semantic] truth?”

The message from the Chinese is similar to the one R. C. Zaehner has read from Hinduism. It is worthwhile to quote in full what Zaehner writes at the end of his remarkable book Hinduism:

What, then, is the message of Hinduism? If it has a message at all, it would seem to be this: to live out your dharma which is embedded in the conscience, to do what instinctively you know to be right, and thereby to live in harmony with the dharma of all things, so that in the end you may see all things in yourself and yourself in all things and thereby enter into the eternal and timeless peace which is the dharma of moksha, the “law” of “freedom” that has its being outside space and time yet comprises and hallows both.58

If one can see all things (including people) in oneself and oneself in all things, then one has become one with the Dharma or Tao. All distinctions are distinctions within one’s being, not without. This, then, is the truth of life.

Therefore, unlike Aristotle, a Chinese philosopher would not say, “Although I love my teacher, I love truth more than I love my teacher.”59 For the Chinese, the most important thing is to participate in creating a better world for everyone, not to find out some objective truth. So in responding to questions like “Who is smarter, Lao Zi or Confucius?” while the typical Western mind would tend to choose one or the other, the Chinese may answer “They are both very smart.” Is that not enough? Does it really matter that much if we have an either-or answer? Not at all. This nonobsession with [semantic] truth partly explains why the Chinese have no problem accepting Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism together.

Another reason for embracing different religions is that “breadth” has been a traditional Chinese virtue. Breadth is not merely tolerance. To be tolerant means to be able to put up with different things. Breadth requires more than tolerance. It means being tolerant with a genuine understanding. Therefore, with this attitude, even if one finds discrepancies between different religions one may simply put them aside and concentrate on what is important in these ways of life. In Chinese this is called “seeking common ground while reserving differences (求同存异 qiu tong cun yi).” It is an important aspect of Chinese wisdom.

Finally, one most important Chinese value is harmony (和 he/huo). The Chinese believe that harmony is a value in itself and is preferable to conflict. In the Chinese view of dialectic harmonization, the Tao or Way is a process of harmonizing differences of things. The
Tao is one and is the source of all polarities. It has two complementary elements or aspects, yang and yin. A harmonious interplay of yang and yin is most desirable.

The world is full of polarities. But polarities are not necessarily contradictions. As Cheng Chung-ying puts it, when we find ourselves at one of the polarities and at the edge of a conflict, we can and should, through understanding and re-understanding of reality and ourselves, “project ourselves into a situation where conflict and antagonism will disappear through an overall process of adjustment of ourselves to the world.”

For instance, Ming Tai Zu (明太祖 Tai-tsu), the first emperor (1368–1398) of the Ming dynasty, attempted to harmonize the three religions by saying that while Confucianism is the Way of yang or manifest virtue, Taoism and Buddhism are yin or hidden virtue. For him, the yang virtue is the culmination of this-worldly doctrine and can be relied upon for countless generations, and the yin virtues are secret aids of the kingly Way; together

the two comprise the Way of Heaven.

Chinese pragmatic minds do not tend to take principles, particularly theoretical principles, rigidly. Between the option of “harmonizing differences” and “fighting it out” they tend to choose harmonization. This is perhaps the ultimate reason for Chinese embracing multiple religious participation.

While the Buddhists’ willingness to participate in the process of harmonizing differences has helped Buddhism become very successful in China, the unwillingness to harmonize has been detrimental to the development of Christianity in China. For example, in 1704, the papal authority issued a decree to ban Chinese Christians’ participation in traditional Chinese rites. The pope stated in the decree that “One name and one only God for Chinese, T’ien-chu or the Heavenly Lord, ... Ritual acts in honor of Confucius also had to stop.” In 1706 the Chinese emperor Kang Xi responded by expelling from the country all Christian missionaries who refused to abide by the rule that allowed Chinese Christians to observe the traditional rites.

Then, what lessons can be drawn from all this? Today we live in an increasingly smaller world with people of different cultural backgrounds. In order for different cultures to coexist, we need first of all to tolerate different religious beliefs and practices. We also need to look beyond tolerance. We cannot live well with our neighbors of different religions unless we have a genuine understanding of them. We cannot have a genuine understanding of them unless we understand their religions. One way to understand religions different from our own is to try to practice different religions. A Chinese Christian with a strong Confucian background may understand both Confucianism and Christianity better than a mere Confucian or a mere Christian. She may be better equipped for promoting both cultures and living across the two cultures. Some people may think she is being incoherent. But what is wrong with such an “incoherence”? The Chinese example indicates that as long as we keep an attitude of breadth, we will be able to accommodate different religions.

John Hick and others have explored, in theory, the possibility of coexisting religions that are valid respectively on their own account. This theory can be used to support the idea of multiple religious participation. If no single religion has the ultimate truth and each only reflects a facet of the Ultimate as Hick maintains, then no religion is absolute or perfect. If religion expresses the human drive for perfection, then one ought to embrace different religions in order to make one’s spiritual life as perfect and fulfilling as possible within human limitations. Of course there is a provision to it—there must be a productive way to put them all to work. The Chinese case provides a practical illustration of how some religions, even though seemingly contradictory, can be integrated into an individual’s life.

Although my thesis here can be prescriptive, it is first of all descriptive. It describes the way in which countless Chinese have lived their lives. So, the question here is not whether multiple citizenship in faith (multiple religious participation) is possible, but whether it is desirable. I do not claim that multiple religious participation is the only way to a fulfilling religious life. But it is one way. And very likely a good way.

The jacket of this book shows a Chinese painting in which three old men are exploring the Way, a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Buddhist. For the Chinese, all three are great teachers. If a fourth person were to join them, would he be welcome? Now, let us turn to the relation between Confucianism and democracy in the final chapter of the book.