

Understanding how the Tao speaks to us now



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In the Introduction to his translation of the ancient Chinese scripture, the “Tao Te Ching,” Guy Leekley writes: “There are serious seekers in every spiritual tradition, and the nature of their quests varies. In some traditions, they may seek enlightenment, salvation, or the kingdom of God.

Others may seek awareness of their own divine nature, or union with the One, freedom from illusion, or a life of loving kindness.” In this way, Leekley perhaps invites all of us, on a sacred or secular path, to enter this book with an expectation of awe. Indeed, he uses the term “sacred” as a description of “the way of being that is worthy of reverence and respect.”

I remember the first time I read the “Tao” in a college World Religions class. A scripture that doesn’t mention a deity, theology or a specific sectarian group was surprising – yet surprisingly refreshing to a young mind emerging from a narrow bubble of beliefs.

Everyone is familiar with the opening lines of Genesis: “In the beginning God created . . .” On balance, the Tao opens with: “Any way that can be explained is not the sacred Way. Any word that can be explained is not the sacred Word.” Another Chinese translation puts it: “The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name.”

Most holy books are long, with difficult, confusing, theological terms that take “experts” to decipher. We

have to know something of the context, the ancient cultures and worldviews which produced the writers of those honored texts. This is interesting but not necessary with the Tao. Not that its brief 81 chapters are easy to understand. “We have been looking at it, without seeing it; We have been hearing it, without listening; We have been touching it, without feeling . . . Release now into this timeless flow of the present moment. Awaken to the eternal Tao.” (chapter 14)

There is no call to worship the Tao. It is not divine, but it is eternal, a part of everything – it IS everything. As Leekley describes the Tao, it “represents the sacred Way, but is also used to signify a fundamental pattern of energy in the universe, energy that we can sense, but not explain or describe . . .” It seems reasonable to understand the Tao Te Ching (meaning “The Classic of the Way and its Virtue”) as a poetic presentation of the human Path as it intersects with the nonhuman—a natural, secular journey of life.

The legendary author, Lao Tzu, who may have lived some 2,500 years ago, is, like most founders of religions, lost in the mists of history and tradition. Yet, this wisdom literature continues to have a powerful influence over Chinese thought. As the scholar Wing-Tsit Chan writes: “No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, medicine – or even cooking – without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book.”

With our current climate of distrust for the government of China (and racialized “China Virus” rhetoric), it may be hard to seriously consider the teachings of Lao Tzu. Yet, just as we need to separate the message of Jesus from the governments that claim Christianity, the wisdom of the Tao is not confined by the border of China. or any other borders. Its universalism can be

instructive to people of any nation or belief.

Leekley translates the first verses of chapter 19: “Let go of such lofty goals as becoming holy or wise, and we will be better off. Let go of righteousness, and we will treat each other with greater compassion.” Imagine a sacred scripture instructing us to let go of being religiously correct! This is the stunning power of this wisdom text. If we stop trying to be “right” maybe we can focus our attention on treating others with thoughtful kindness.

I’ve often thought this is Religion’s blindspot – to spend so much time and effort on showing faith and proving devotion rather than living as better human beings. Secular and spiritual people can best relate and get things done when ethics are the common basis of life and community. Beliefs change; what is good and right and common sense stays fairly steady.

“It may be considered the mother of the universe, I do not know its name; I call it Tao. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great.” (25) A good alternative for those who want to name and define a deity. “The True Seeker does not grasp. The more she gives to others, the more she has for herself.” (Leekley translation, 81).

The simply profound philosophy of the Tao, grounded in Nature, Earth and compassion – wisdom for all humankind.

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