

UNITY IN RELIGION

A Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Christianity, Islam, and Taoism are examined with specific reference to each tradition's conception of unity, both with God and with other humans. Conceptions of unity are used as a heuristic device in order to examine the potential for their use in inter-religious dialogue. Challenges in the representation of exoteric forms of religious expression are considered and it is determined that, while it is impossible to completely ignore the exoteric representations of religious practice, the primary focus must be on the transcendent and esoteric experiences of each tradition. One or two philosophers from each tradition are chosen because of their commitment to a particular tradition and systematic representation of the aforementioned experiences within. Thomas Merton, with his doctrine of Contemplation, represents the Christian tradition, Islam is

represented by Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*), and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu represent the Taoist tradition with the *Tao te Ching* and other foundational texts. Their writings are then analyzed to determine if there are common expressions of unity found within each tradition. It is determined that there is a common emphasis in each tradition on the inability to perceive things as they really are, a reference to an absolute reality, a push to experience that reality, and a fundamental correlation between that experience and the actualization of human relationships. These concepts do not represent theological or philosophical equivalents, but, when used as a heuristic device, they do provide avenues to foster in depth inter-religious dialogue.

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INTRODUCTION¹

Diversity in religious practice is evident in the global community. Various sects, schools, denominations, and factions of religions can be found throughout the world, and being in close proximity to one another necessitates some form of dialogue between separate traditions. This project is an attempt at producing and examining avenues in which inter-religious dialogue might take place. In light of the purpose of this project, I will focus my analysis on the conceptions of unity held by each group.

This paper proposes the utility of unity as a heuristic tool to mediate the discourse of philosophical and theological concepts regarding the personal experience of the divine in association with the presence of an imagined community of religious believers. If traditions can recognize the presence of similar religious expressions, then the door is kept open for further dialogue. This paper will explore unity within streams of Christianity, Islam, and Taoism. Christianity and Islam have comparable organizational structures and theological similarities because of their common ancestry. Taoism does not have an analogous structure or history with either Christianity or Islam, having developed thousands of miles away from the other two traditions. For this reason,

¹ This thesis follows the style and format of *The MLA Handbook*.

it will serve as a test case in determining how well the heuristic conception of unity might work as a pathway to inter-religious dialogue.

Recognition of a common emphasis on divine and interpersonal relationships may help lay the foundation for inter-religious dialogue to take place and help different traditions gain insight into various other peoples and cultures. Heuristic recognition of these common philosophical considerations is especially important because of the aforementioned necessity to live as a global community. It will be determined that by focusing on the transcendent, esoteric aspects of religious experience, common conceptions of unity can be found. More specifically, I will present a common recognition that a human's typical perception of the world is flawed, but that there is some form of absolute existence with which one may become united. After this framework of existence is set forth, I will show that the traditions emphasize the necessity of unity with that absolute and that unity with the absolute is associated with a unity among people on the earth. The following is a more detailed analysis of the challenges involved in performing a study of unity as a heuristic device across religious lines and the subsequent methodology used to overcome these challenges and compare philosophical and theological concepts.

Challenges

It is not difficult to point out obvious distinctions among the organizational structure, cultural lifestyle, and ethical considerations of Christianity, Islam, and Taoism. The three have been prevalent in different parts of the world for most of their histories, they have sometimes fought and even gone to war with one another, and there have certainly been great doctrinal disputes among scholars and philosophers of the different traditions. This represents the first challenge for methodological consideration.

The Christian church began as an organization led by a succession of leaders from the time Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.² This organization was referred to as the *ecclesia* and represented the community of people who followed the teachings of Jesus. Though never fully united, the community enjoyed varying amounts of growth and political involvement and for a time became the official Church of Rome during the reign of Constantine.³ Having begun during the lifetime of Muhammad, the Islamic community, or *ummah*, is also a social and political community because its leaders found

² Margaret M Mitchell, ed., *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1: Origins to Constantine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 91.

³ Mitchell 538.

it impossible to divorce the religious aspect of life from everyday concerns.⁴ In fact, several Muslim leaders have stated that the religion of Islam may not truly exist without a “strong Islamic State...which could apply the laws of Islam and defend it against any foreign opposition and domination.”⁵ What is important to recognize here is the clear push in both Christianity and Islam for the development of a distinct community to represent each religion in the world.

In contrast, the primary difficulty in identifying a unified body of Taoist practitioners or followers is found in the lack of analogous forms of religious hierarchy and organization. In fact, “no special term existed to express religious activity. In order to translate our word *religion*, modern Chinese usage has coined the term *tsung-chiao*, literally ‘sectarian doctrine.’”⁶ This term may be applicable when referencing the followers of Islam or Christianity, but does not encompass the true activity of Taoist practitioners. Those who would be considered Taoist typically would not recognize such a label and live in such a fashion as to assimilate various religious and ancestral practices

⁴ Keith Ward, Religion and Community (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) 31.

⁵ Rashid Rida qtd. in John Esposito, Islam and Politics (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984) 35.

⁶ Kristofer Schipper, The Taoist Body, Trans. Karen C. Duval (University of California Press, 1993) 3.

into everyday life and social interaction rather than becoming part of an organized body.

The Taoist religion is much more of a foundational aspect of one's being than a structured way of organizing life and holds no defining "doctrinal creed, profession of faith, or dogmatism..."⁷ The few who would consider themselves or be considered by the community as true Taoists have devoted themselves to becoming masters, similar in religious education and devotion to the priesthood of the Christian Church or the *mullah* of early Islam, but again lack the organizational hierarchy to be considered the same type of leader.

Apart from the obvious distinctions in organizational structure and history, the diversity of languages inherent in different traditions also presents a challenge in making this project successful. Translation of precise meaning is difficult to accomplish and one can easily lose much of the subtlety and emphasis intended by a particular author.

Despite this fact, language is certainly a crucial part of any argument or idea and its role in philosophy and theology must, therefore, be considered. Wittgenstein's philosophical considerations on language have been essential to the development of the philosophy of

⁷ Schipper 3.

language and will help to cultivate an understanding of how the use of language presents a challenge for inter-religious dialogue.

The essential focus of Wittgenstein's later works was to point out that language was not necessarily something in reference to a concrete idea or concept in the world.⁸ His ideas were in direct conflict with the Vienna Circle of philosophers, of which he was a part. This circle wrote that in order for something to have meaning or value, it must be empirically or scientifically verifiable. Thus religious propositions and value statements were of no consequence. In arguing against this view, Wittgenstein espoused the view that language was in fact given meaning precisely by the way in which it was used. There was no way for him to divorce language from the context in which it was used and thus the words one speaks will necessarily be interpreted differently if viewed in a different context. Language is a contextual attempt at representing the esoteric nature of the experience and not necessarily indicative of the experience itself. Thus, all religious language and expressions can only represent the surface structure of a religious experience. Without a concrete referential theory of meaning in which every word has a

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Third ed. (Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1958) 3.

precise definition and referent in any context, one cannot rely on language alone as an accurate depiction of experience or belief and such conceptions from distinct traditions may only be compared heuristically.

In addition to these exoteric representations of each tradition, there is an experience of “direct knowledge of or communion with the source or ground of ultimate reality.”⁹ The experience often cannot be directly expressed, but only compared to later states of consciousness. It is a sense in which, as Wittgenstein would call it, one is not “seeing as”, meaning they are no longer limited by the constraints of the senses to perceive a mental effect, but finally see things as they are in reality.¹⁰

While this experience is not limited to any person or group, it maintains a sense of esoteric anonymity because of its reliance on a personal, somewhat unique experience. It may be impossible to put perfectly into words the actual experience of an encounter with God and thus a fully systematic and rational explanation of such thought is not possible. It is perhaps this consideration that forces the transcendent to remain esoteric on some level.

⁹ Lindsay Jones, ed., “Mysticism [Further Considerations],” Encyclopedia of Religion, Second ed., Vol. 9., (Detroit: Tomson Gale, 2005) 6355.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein 193.

The task of representing such experiences can be attempted in several ways.

Many such writers tend to use a style more poetic than systematic or academic. This allows the writer to capture more of the feeling in the moment and draw the reader closer to the experience than other types of writing could. Writers also tend to balance between negation and affirmation to juxtapose the complexities of God. Through such practice, one “seeks to pass from what is finite to what is infinite, from that which seems to that which is, out of all lower forms of reality to that which is Supremely Real, and, in the end, to become Being itself.”¹¹ The recognition of such challenges in expressing religious experience again requires that a comparison of religious experience remains a heuristic enterprise rather than a direct and thorough philosophical discourse.

Methodological Considerations

One of the keys to making this project successful is to examine each religion in a way that will recognize the exoteric distinctions of things such as hierarchical structure in leadership, the language used to describe or name God, and rituals of prayer, but maintain emphasis on less obvious theological and practical implications. It is in this

¹¹ Margaret Smith, The Way of the Mystics: The Early Christian Mystics and the Rise of the Sufis, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 4.

esoteric and transcendent realm that many have focused the discussion concerning unity in religious traditions. Frithjof Schuon makes the assertion that at the intuitive core, religions share one common experience of reality or God.¹²

Focusing entirely on the transcendent or esoteric aspect of religious experience may lead one to believe that all religious experience is fundamentally the same. The difficulty of accepting this idea is, as Richard Bush writes in critique of Schuon, that “every observable facet of religious life in the world...cannot be cited to support any contention about the esoteric.”¹³ There can be no denial or discourse concerning this belief because of the inherently personal nature of such experiences. Bush also cites a problem with the complete distinction between the exoteric level of tradition and history and the esoteric realm of intuition and experience. It seems that at least some link must be allowed between the two in order to understand the interplay between them in a person’s life.

¹² Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, Trans. Peter Townsend (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

¹³ Richard C. Bush, "Frithjof Schuon's "The Transcendent Unity of Religions": Con (in Criticism, Discussion, Bibliographical Survey)," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 44.4 (1976): 716.

In fact, Schuon would later point out that "...exoteric means...will be used...by intellectual transposition into the esoteric order...and...by their regulating action on the individual portion of the being."¹⁴ This passage represents the idea that the exoteric manifestation of religion is necessary in so much as it aids in the esoteric revelation of one's mind. The tragedy is found when the exoteric becomes the absolute form of religious experience and practice, when instead its true existence should be the manifestation of the esoteric experience. Thus exoteric forms of religious expression may at the same time be "the outward radiation and the veil" of the esoteric.¹⁵ There is a correlation between both forms of religious expression and this must be represented in the analysis of the traditions. For this reason, though focusing on the esoteric level of theological and philosophical consideration, I will present such things in reference to and in light of the exoteric and more practical manifestations of religious experience.

By focusing my efforts on the transcendent and esoteric writings of each tradition, I will show how this form of experience serves as a heuristic device to foster inter-religious dialogue. In order to narrow the field of information further, I have

¹⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Essential Frithjof Schuon, (World Wisdom, 2005) 154.

¹⁵ Nasr 155.

selected one or two philosophers from each tradition as the focus of this research. The concepts and ideas presented are primarily from, though not limited to, the writings of Thomas Merton from the Christian tradition, Ibn ‘Arabi from the Muslim tradition, and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu from the Taoist tradition. By engaging these writers in an a-historical dialogue, I will keep the amount information presented manageable and at the same time analyze views within each tradition that are foundational or represent the philosophical development of early and foundational theologians. Though not comprehensive by any means, it will present a beneficial introduction to avenues for more thorough and intensive scholarly discourse.

Before analyzing the three religions through an a-historical dialogue, a concern with this particular methodology must be addressed. Namely, this type of dialogue requires a common conceptual framework that is not intuitively present. It is simple to find such a framework when comparing philosophers and theologians of the same time or tradition. For instance, Plato and Aristotle or Kant and Hegel were engaged in philosophical debates based on similar presuppositions and cultural settings. Their arguments are easy to compare because they are able to take a stance on one another’s views and consider how the views are distinct. Even comparing Aristotle to Kant is not

so difficult considering the cultural succession of philosophical work that links the two together.

This project is different however. There is a sense in which Christianity and Islam share a common ancestry and framework for discourse in that both take similar stances on the existence of God, the presence of an afterlife, and each can be traced back through a similar linguistic tradition. But Taoism does not share in these things because it is fully separate linguistically and does not consider the existence of a god in a similar monotheistic fashion. It is clear, however, that there is some sense in which the concepts of each tradition may find their philosophical counterpart within the others. It will be evident that, though staying true to each philosopher's understanding of unity within their tradition, philosophical conceptions of unity can be compared heuristically across religious lines. This comparison will open new avenues for inter-religious dialogue because of the similar notions of religious experience that are present.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the first tradition that will be examined. I will begin with a brief discussion of the development of transcendent theology and transition into the writings of Thomas Merton. In order to develop his theology and understand his conception of unity, I will first focus on the structure of reality with reference to the fallen nature of man and the existence of God as a foundation to human existence. I will then show how Merton's conception of unity fits into this structure of reality with reference to both unity with God and with other people in community.

Transcendent theology, for a time, was a form of theology inseparable from orthodox Christian theology. It was not until Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century that the literature took on its own existence.¹⁶ Originally conceived as a form of contemplation on the experience of the divine, transcendent thought began to push away from the systematization of the orthodox in order to methodologically reflect on the soul's direct experience of God by being more attentive to psychological and conscious aspects of these encounters. Thomas Aquinas laid the foundation for transcendent unity

¹⁶ Jean Yves Lacoste, Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, Vol. 2, (G-O) (New York: Routledge, 2005) 1082.

with his thoughts on the nature of change. For him, if things are in flux there must “be some grounding subject able to endure change...”¹⁷ The constant flux of nature was indicative of an absolute foundation with which one could unite in transcendent contemplation. Later, Meister Eckhardt would return to the Neoplatonic idea of the soul as a place where this union could be fostered.¹⁸ The *Devotio Moderna* from the late middle ages set forth a practical approach to attaining unity. For instance, it espoused the importance of humility as a way to set aside a personal will to allow union in harmony with Christ. The classical expression of this can be found in Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*.¹⁹

Church leaders have frequently debated the merit and authenticity of mystic practice, but the lasting nature of esoteric thought as well as the diverse authorship of its doctrines is clear evidence that many church leaders and theologians have found the transcendent experience to be authentic and worthy of much study and writing. The sheer volume of information does, however, present a problem in attempting to study

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *An Aquinas Reader*, Ed. Mary T. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999) 195.

¹⁸ Lacoste 1083.

¹⁹ Erwin Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 3 (J-O) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003) 679-680.

conceptions of unity in depth. I have selected the writings of Thomas Merton to serve as a participant in this discourse.

Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton, born in 1915, became a Catholic monk in 1938 because of his strong religious feelings and social concerns. He would later use his education in poetry from Columbia University as a foundation for expounding upon spiritual matters and became famous with his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948. In 1968, while attending a conference of Buddhist and Catholic monks, Merton met his untimely death. However, during his life he was able to produce hundreds of articles and almost fifty books. His writings will serve as a glimpse into the mind of a man who sought to transcend boundaries in religious thought and understand the relevance of different traditions.

Merton was influenced by a wide range of people and traditions and incorporated them all into his Catholic life. Much of his influence came from mystics, both western and eastern. His philosophical inclusiveness began to grow when Merton was exposed to Dan Walsh, who attempted to show how past philosophers were able to throw diverse light on the same truths. Merton sought to incorporate all of this into his Catholic

thought rather than to abandon one faith for another or create his own and took much interest in others who ignored the traditional bounds of their religious tradition. It was this search for the truth, one that transcends the doctrinal and theological constructs of diverse religions, that underlies his writings and led him to seek truth wherever it might be found.

The primary focus of his search, however, was on early Christian theologians and leaders. John of the Cross, a theologian from the Spanish Golden Age,²⁰ believed one must understand that God “secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding of what manner is this infused contemplation.”²¹ Thus if one comes to this realization, they will stop seeking the very concepts that God is trying to drive out on the path towards union. It must be the action of God and not an attempt by the created soul to attain perfect love. It is perhaps most important to recognize that “sanctity and pure contemplation are only to be found in the perfection of love.”²² The purity of love is at the heart of contemplation, for it empties

²⁰ Lacoste 824.

²¹ John of the Cross, “Dark Night of the Soul,” John of the Cross : Selected Writings, Ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) II v.1.

²² William Henry Shannon, Thomas Merton's Dark Path : The Inner Experience of a Contemplative (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981) 29.

the soul of all that is not God and desires no reward. Drawing on these ideas of John of the Cross, Merton attempted to detail practical ways that one could react to the desire to find unity with God. Merton sought a systematic understanding of this tradition and used contemplation as the cornerstone for his work.

The underlying call of Thomas Merton's writings is to experience God in an act of contemplative union. Humanity, for Merton, had fallen from an original state of perfect contemplation, which is what he named the state of perfect union with God. Contemplation, then, is the means whereby one can be redeemed to original unity by overcoming all that alienates one from God and "[is] an immediate and in some sense passive intuition of the inmost reality, of our spiritual self and God present within [the self]." ²³ Further, "[c]ontemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life...It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source." ²⁴

²³ Thomas Merton, The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation, Ed. William Shannon (San Francisco: Harper, 2003) 57.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (Norfolk, Connecticut: A New Directions Book, 1961) 1.

Merton's first attempt at writing down his own thoughts on contemplation came in a small booklet entitled *What is Contemplation*.²⁵ The book added little original insight, but served mainly as a compilation of earlier church leaders' thoughts. Here, he draws out the role of desiring God as necessary to attain unity with God, as found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. At this point in his writings, Merton describes only a vague experience of love that may first guide the seeds of contemplation in each person to grow and push toward union with God. Merton later makes clear that there is only one pure form of contemplation, which is infused or passive contemplation, resulting from such an experience.²⁶ This form of contemplation is a pure and complete union with the love of God that empties one of all other presence. On the path to this, Merton does recognize the value of what is considered active contemplation in which one recites liturgy, scripture, or music. These practices will push one toward union with the church or activities in their own life, but he emphasizes that only infused contemplation brings one to union with God "as He is in Himself."²⁷

²⁵ Shannon 14.

²⁶ Merton, Inner 71.

²⁷ Shannon 21.

Merton's next attempt at detailing the contemplative life was *Seeds of Contemplation*, written more from the perspective of one who had "tasted the joys of contemplation"²⁸ rather than one who had "studied contemplation."²⁹ Finding its title within the pages of his first work, Merton sought to draw out the need for individuals to bring the seeds of the Holy Spirit to fruition by recognizing that humans' dependence is on God alone, that "[t]he secret of [one's] identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God"³⁰ and that one ought to be blinded by the light of God into the darkness of infused contemplation. When this state is finally reached, "It is no longer something poured out of God into a created subject, so much as God living in God and identifying a created life with His own Life so that there is nothing left of any significance but God living in God."³¹ Merton continually emphasized the importance of finding identity in God through contemplation.

The doctrine of contemplation is the foundation of each of Merton's works and will serve as the foundation of my analysis of his views on unity with God and

²⁸ Shannon 36.

²⁹ Shannon 36.

³⁰ Merton, New Seeds 196.

³¹ Merton, New Seeds 196.

community. With a basic understanding of contemplation in hand, I will now turn to a thorough discussion of Merton's views on unity. While Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* is certainly his most well known and widely read writing, the following analysis will focus primarily on his more systematic studies of contemplation to analyze his conceptions of the unity people encounter with and in God. I will first analyze his views on the structure of reality and move on to show how conceptions of unity fit into that structure.

A Fallen Creature

Merton's view of the structure of the world hinges on an original state of unity that humans shared with God.³² He uses a biblical view of the subject to discuss contemplation in terms of the Garden of Eden as found in the third chapter of Genesis. Merton begins with the fall of man as an allegorical approach to explaining how man fell out of an original, contemplative state into the world of exterior and contingent things. According to Augustine, "man's interior and spiritual self, his contemplative self, was led astray by Eve, his exterior, material, and practical self, his active self. Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of

³² Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudhay, 1961) 52.

an active, worldly existence.”³³ With great difficulty, he was forced to “see” himself as object among all that was “exterior, transient, illusory, and trivial.”³⁴ The only way to restore the original unity was for God to become man so that “in the Man-God, man might be able to lose himself as man and find himself as God.”³⁵

This was not, to Merton, original thought, but an interpretation of biblical passages such as John 8 and 10:30 where the unity of Christ and God are professed.³⁶ Human’s ability to be brought into this unity is then told in Romans 8:14 – “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”³⁷ It was this idea of sonship in unity with God that made Christology and understanding the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ important to the early church fathers. Without the inseparable natures of Christ, all would be in vain because a restored contemplative unity would not be available through purely worldly means and there would remain a sense of imperfect union.

³³ Merton, Inner 35.

³⁴ Merton, Inner 35.

³⁵ Merton, Inner 36.

³⁶ Merton, Inner 36.

³⁷ Kenneth Barker, ed., The NIV Study Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1995).

Restoration of Unity

The fall from a state of perfect contemplation does not, however, mean that there is no longer a God with which to attain unity. It is still possible to become unified through contemplation and the most ideal form is that of infused or passive contemplation. In this state, the soul is purely united with God without distraction and restored to the original state before the fall.³⁸ There is, however no precise manner by which one may find this unity and it is typically necessary for one to require action through prayers, liturgy, or service in order to experience unity. This is considered active contemplation and is that state in which “there is a deliberate and sustained effort to detect the will of God in events and to bring one’s whole self into harmony with that will.”³⁹ While action can never achieve perfect unity in itself, most people need to align their own will with that of their creator to attain a greater perfection above the subjection of the fallen world.⁴⁰ More simply put, “[w]hen the work of thought leads to an intuition of love and of religious awe, then we have ‘active contemplation’,”⁴¹ and so the

³⁸ Merton, *Inner* 56.

³⁹ Merton, *Inner* 59.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955) 26.

⁴¹ Merton, *Inner* 60.

movement of the soul towards perfect contemplative unity with God is begun by the harmonious activity of the body and mind.

One prevalent form of active contemplation is the liturgy of the church. It is here where the words and actions of individuals are joined in such a way that the secular gives way to a sense of 'holy awe' at the experience of God. Liturgy can take the form of both spoken word and sacred action. Songs and chants are a part of liturgy, but for Merton the purest form is the Holy Eucharist where "the believer affirms his union with Christ in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection from the Dead. He becomes one heart, one mind, and one spirit with the Blessed Saviour."⁴² Here, the contemplative believer is taken into full union with God in body, mind, and spirit and will avert the possibility of worship becoming lifeless and external.

The path to this experience, what Merton calls the "illuminative way,"⁴³ is fundamentally a paradox in that one must come to enlighten the inner self in experience of God and at the same time blind and even "put to sleep"⁴⁴ the exterior consciousness. This process illustrates the complexity of the state of pure contemplation because it is

⁴² Merton, Inner 62.

⁴³ Merton, Inner 89.

⁴⁴ Merton, Inner 90.

through action that one typically comes to experience God first, but a state of infused contemplation must realize inaction and accept the limitations in the exterior self. It is key that human actions are not truly the means by which God is experienced, because “we are not enlightened by our own efforts, our own love, our own sacrifice...[but] all must be ‘darkened’ that is to say, forgotten, in order that God Himself may become the light of our soul.”⁴⁵ The action of God moving in one’s soul is the foundation of contemplative union.

Further, one does not realize that relaxing the exterior self in passive contemplation of God “implies a serious and energetic effort of faith...”⁴⁶ When one eliminates the preoccupation with methods of prayer and systems for determining progress, even though one may feel distant, as though there is no consolation or light in prayer, God is probably closer than ever before. The distractions are removed and the veil is lifted allowing one to experience God in His most pure form. One feels as though

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, Introduction, Counsels of Light and Love, By St. John of the Cross (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) 5.

⁴⁶ Merton, Inner 91.

they have stepped out of the boat and begins to recognize the shortcomings of the flesh as “evil, ungodly, [and] hypocritical...”⁴⁷ because the flesh is ephemeral and illusory.

The paradox, put in another way, is that “when progress becomes serious...it gives the bewildering impression that all spiritual life has collapsed and that progress is at an end.”⁴⁸ Despite all effort to systematically demonstrate the concept of contemplation, for Merton, one may never fully understand the concept that is union with God. In Merton’s own words, “[God] loves us more than we love ourselves, as if we were Himself. He loves us moreover with our own wills, with our own decisions. How can we understand the mystery of our union with God Who is closer to us than we are to ourselves?”⁴⁹ Through passivity, the action of God is found. In solitude, perfect unity is attained. Searching in darkness, the soul is illumined by pure light. For Merton, one could only point towards and imperfectly seek union through action because, in the end, it was beyond all language and philosophical conceptualization resting entirely on the action of God.

⁴⁷ Merton, Inner 91.

⁴⁸ Merton, Inner 92.

⁴⁹ Merton, No Man 132.

Experience of the Self

With a basic understanding of Merton's views on the structure of reality, I will now present a more detailed understanding of Merton's conceptions of unity, first with God and then in community. In his introduction to St. John of the Cross's book *Counsels of Light and Love*,⁵⁰ Merton gives a small discourse on some of the ideas within John's writings. This discourse serves as a quick summary of his beliefs about the social nature of man and how that relates to his relationship with God. He tells that "[t]hose who live the contemplative life on this level, are all the more closely united with one another in proportion as they grow in spiritual union with God."⁵¹ This also helps to qualify the reasoning behind the expectation that contemplative people would not show much affection and closeness with each other, for to grow in the "true delicacy of love,"⁵² one must not "interfer[e] with the order of the community, the peace of their companions, and the secret action of the Holy Spirit."⁵³ John's doctrine is all based on the ideal

⁵⁰ St. John of the Cross, *Counsels of Light and Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

⁵¹ Merton, Introduction 3.

⁵² Merton, Introduction 3.

⁵³ Merton, Introduction 3.

balance of human and divine in which one may balance a necessary level of detachment from people with a pure love in the Spirit to attain proper unity with both.

This is important to Merton's understanding of unity with God because maintaining a proper detachment necessitates that one focus on their own spiritual development, but this inward focus may be taken too far. Merton's book entitled *The Inner Experience* begins with a denouncement of what Merton considers to be the path of desire for contemplation. On this path, one seeks to "become a contemplative.' That is, [one] will wish to admire, in [the self], something called contemplation."⁵⁴ The difficulty in seeking contemplation is that a desire to integrate contemplation into one's life already guarantees that they will fall short. For the exterior 'I' that exists within the distractions of this world is alien from the interior, true 'I' and by turning to the exterior to seek contemplation, one may "believe that [their] experience of [the self] is an experience of God."⁵⁵ To experience unity with the divine, one must find the interior 'I' apart from the things generally used to define the self, such as names, actions, or occupations. One must find what the self is in actuality. This is similar to the

⁵⁴ Merton, *Inner* 5.

⁵⁵ Merton, *Inner* 5.

philosophical distinction of the “noumena,” thing in itself, versus the “phenomena”, or object of experience, as espoused by Immanuel Kant.⁵⁶ Every action and attempt at procuring pure contemplation will imperfectly represent the self as phenomena and cannot be rooted in the inner self.

People, instead, must be carried by faith and guided by love towards an encounter with the divine. It is not that the inner self ceases to recognize exterior objects and the typical definitions of self, but “[it] ceases to be guided by them. [It] ceases to depend on them. [It] ceases to treat them as ultimate.”⁵⁷ When this happens, the inner self is awakened and “[s]ince the inmost ‘I’ is the perfect image of God, then when that ‘I’ awakens, he finds within himself the Presence of Him Whose image he is. And, by paradox beyond all human expression, God and the soul seem to have but one single ‘I.’”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 136.

⁵⁷ Merton, Inner 16.

⁵⁸ Merton, Inner 18.

The Christian Community

The key in understanding the community, the unity of human beings, is found in experiencing the love of God and sharing it with others. As Merton says, “Such love leads to God because it comes from Him. It leads to a union between souls that is as intimate as their own union with Him.”⁵⁹ It is only in union with God that one is in union with people. He states further that “[i]f we know God, our identification of ourselves with those we love will be patterned on our union with God...[for] in ourselves we will always remain separate and remote from one another, but in God we can be one with those we love.”⁶⁰ In every account, Merton emphasizes that all love comes from God and it is only through this divine grace that people are capable of selfless, loving interaction.

In the introduction to *No Man is an Island*, Merton lays out his task to consider meditations on some of life’s great questions and show that “[w]hat every man looks for is...the full discovery of who he himself really is...[and] the discovery that he cannot find himself in himself alone, but that he must find himself in and through others.”⁶¹ In

⁵⁹ Merton, *No Man* 167.

⁶⁰ Merton, *No Man* 166.

⁶¹ Merton, *No Man* xv.

addition, the emphasis placed on the inner self and the personal experience in contemplation is not intended to exclude the exterior world or 'other' selves. To be purely in isolation would be to "condemn ourselves in advance to complete frustration in our quest for spiritual awareness."⁶² In fact "unity in love is one of the most characteristic works of the inner self, so that paradoxically the inner 'I' is not only isolated but at the same time united with others on a higher plane...His inner self is, in fact, inseparable from Christ and hence it is in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from all the other 'I's' who live in Christ..."⁶³

Christ's spirit dwells within the Christian believer who becomes like Christ in this bond, who becomes one with all those in whom this spirit dwells. Complete withdrawal would be fatal to the spiritual awakening, but isolation can actually aid in the soul's realization of "a higher union in which our solitude is not lost, but perfected."⁶⁴ In this, Merton emphasizes the fact that it must be the interior self in union with Christ that unites people rather than an exterior collective consciousness that arouses a "parody of

⁶² Merton, Inner 19.

⁶³ Merton, Inner 22.

⁶⁴ Merton, Inner 24.

religious mystery”⁶⁵ with “meretricious assurance of greatness and infallibility, and the sweet loss of personal responsibility which one enjoys by abandoning himself to a collective mood, no matter how murderous or vile it may be in itself.”⁶⁶ This is for Merton what the New Testament speaks of as the Antichrist, which is a “pseudo-Christ”⁶⁷ that enslaves real selves to something other than God.

Along similar lines, Merton speaks of the root of happiness being found in the sharing of love. Sharing love is God’s inner law that allows one to freely express their being and attain happiness. Hence it is in the giving of love, the satisfaction of the beloved, that happiness may be found. This love should not be confused with selfish desire or merely wanting to make another person happy, but it is the recognition of God in another that allows one to love by “seek[ing] the life of the Spirit of God breathing in him.”⁶⁸ In essence, the ideal love is one that equally shares in everything and is not selfish, but conversely must be returned to perfect the act of loving another lest the lover be dissatisfied in the giving of unrequited love. It would be impossible to have more than

⁶⁵ Merton, Inner 27.

⁶⁶ Merton, Inner 27.

⁶⁷ Merton, Inner 27.

⁶⁸ Merton, No Man 7.

a few close, intimate friends because so few have so much in common, but these are “inseparable from our own destiny, and, therefore, our love for them is especially holy: it is a manifestation of God in our lives.”⁶⁹

Merton speaks of the unity of believers not only in the sense of ability to share love, but also in a somewhat metaphysical sense of fundamental union. He states, “When we reach that perfection of love which is the contemplation of God in his glory, our inalienable personalities, while remaining eternally distinct, will nevertheless combine into One so that each one of us will find himself in all the others, and God will be the life and reality of all.”⁷⁰ Again, community is not an option or a choice for those who come to unity with God, for “...to live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others is absolutely necessary if man is to remain human.”⁷¹ The community of Christian believers exists because each believer becomes an integral part of Christ’s body. People maintain their eternally distinct self, but that self begins to be guided by Christ’s spirit and, thus, becomes a part of the Christian community.

⁶⁹ Merton, No Man 12.

⁷⁰ Merton, New Seeds 70.

⁷¹ Merton, New Seeds 55.

Review

It is clear then that Merton puts great emphasis on emptying the self and coming into perfect union with God in what he calls the act of contemplation. Building on the tradition of earlier church fathers, Merton systematically analyzes and expounds upon contemplation. It is determined that the structure of reality is such that humanity has fallen from a state of perfect union and into the phenomenal world of multiplicity and separation from God. For Merton, however, God remains in the world and restoration of unity is possible. In attaining this unity, he writes that one becomes a member of the body of Christ and this union leads the soul to unity with other believers as a part of the same body. This understanding of the structure of the world and the ways in which unity fits into that structure represent Merton's interpretation of Christian doctrine and practice.

ISLAM

The next tradition that I will focus on is Islam. Sufism is the part of the Islamic tradition that values esoteric, transcendent forms of religious expression and will be the particular focus of this paper. I will start from the basic understanding of Sufi doctrine as it is historically considered and transition into the work of Ibn ‘Arabi. The analysis of Ibn ‘Arabi will begin by detailing the dreamlike structure of phenomenal reality and the *wujud*, the foundation of ‘real’ existence. Next, I will describe how one might come to find unity within Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of reality and show how this unity leads to a unity with other people.

Sufism is “often described as a path,... [toward] the elimination of all veils between an individual and God. Traveling this path, one can acquire knowledge of Reality. God is the ultimate reality, not this phenomenal world of multiplicity.”⁷² Adam, when originally created, experienced this unveiled presence of God. In fact, the primary meaning of God blowing the breath (*ruach*) of life into Adam was that the divine presence entered into him as the direct and unveiled presence of God. This presence hides the love and joy of the divine within until one opens up their hearts in the

⁷² James Fadiman, ed. Essential Sufism (Harper San Francisco, 1997) 1.

experience of God. As al-Ghazzali said, “Your heart is a polished mirror. You must wipe it clean of the veil of dust that has gathered upon it, because it is destined to reflect the light of divine secrets.”⁷³ All through life, for him, people dimly reflect divine light at best and it is only at death that “things are seen in their naked reality.”⁷⁴

A central Sufi doctrine that expresses the true nature of reality, apart from the phenomenal and transient nature of the world is that of *tawhid*. It is a concept at the forefront of Muslim thought today and forms “the basis of religious knowledge, history, metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics, as well as social economic, and world order. *Tawhid* has emerged as a powerful symbol of divine, spiritual, and sociopolitical unity.”⁷⁵ It is a concept that began with philosophical considerations on God, moved to socio-moral concerns of how to interact, and finally became a guiding principle to reach out to others and share the complete revelation that came from God.⁷⁶ *Tawhid* is the verbal noun of *wahhada* “to make one” or “to declare or acknowledge oneness”.⁷⁷ It is the

⁷³ Fadiman 102.

⁷⁴ Fadiman 105.

⁷⁵ John Esposito, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 318.

⁷⁶ Esposito, Dictionary 317-318.

⁷⁷ Cyril Glasse, The New Encyclopedia of Islam (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002) 453.

acknowledging of the Unity of God, the indivisible, Absolute, and the sole Real, but it has been understood within Islam in two diametrically opposed ways: in terms of exclusivity and inclusivity. Respectively, these represent the ideas that God is fully separate from creation and that God encompasses all of creation.

The exclusive view of *tawhid* is intended to show the transcendent aspect of God. It states that God is beyond “any analogy, similarity, or quality in creation”⁷⁸ and is against any reference to a personal or anthropomorphic God because this would limit God’s transcendence. The view does not discount that the world does exist in some sense, but there is no systematic attempt at understanding the precise manner in which it can be said to exist. The inclusive view of *tawhid* states that “nothing is outside God”⁷⁹ and expresses God’s immanence. It is this view that is held by the Sufis and is the foundation of their doctrine on attaining unity with God. It would be possible to view such a doctrine as pantheistic or simply atheistic because of the indistinct nature of deity, but the “Sufis were very careful to emphasize that ‘The Lord remains the Lord, and the servant remains the servant.’”⁸⁰ Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine espoused a view that incorporated

⁷⁸ Glasse 455.

⁷⁹ Glasse 455.

⁸⁰ Glasse 455.

both of these views because he found that one could not limit God in such a way to remove either aspect.⁸¹ He formalized this idea in the doctrine of the *wahdat-al-wujud* (unity of being) and it is to his writings that I will now turn.

Ibn 'Arabi

Ibn 'Arabi was born in 1165 C.E. at Murcia. He was nominally a part of the Zahiri School and his beliefs passed as *batini* (esoteric). His basic doctrine stated that “all Being is essentially one, as it all is a manifestation of the divine substance.”⁸² He felt that he had acquired knowledge of the “Greatest Name of Allah” and “seen the beatified Muhammad.” His principle work was *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*, which “gives a complete system of mystic knowledge”⁸³ including a full summary of the work.

Ibn 'Arabi, though an original thinker, is considered to have had a far larger role in formulating and writing down the oral tradition of Sufi thought than in creating a new doctrine of his own. His writings included perspectives of jurisprudence, philosophy, kalam, and Sufism, and were largely based on close readings of the Quran. He has even

⁸¹ Muhyi-d-din Ibn 'Arabi, The Wisdom of the Prophets (Fusus Al-Hikam), Trans. Angela Culme-Seymour (Beshara Publications, 1975) 32.

⁸² M. Th. Houtsma, Biographical Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2006) 439.

⁸³ Houtsma 439.

been “considered by many as the greatest Muslim exponent of metaphysical doctrine.”⁸⁴

Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings suggested that he used many sources other than orthodox Islam.

He espoused a polarity of male/female in the Divine Essence and was renowned for

other metaphysical formulations. Considered to be one of the most intellectual of the

Sufis, it is important to note that *ma’rifah* (“knowledge”) was not the summit of

mysticism for him. Instead *mahabbah* (“love”) was the only thing capable of supporting

tawhid.⁸⁵

Although deemed a Sufi by his followers, Ibn ‘Arabi would prefer the term

tahqiq, a reference to his desire to see all things in relation to the unity found in the

absolute truth and reality that is God.⁸⁶ To achieve *tahqiq*, one must follow the

indispensable guidelines of the Quran to open the eyes of the heart (*qalb*). However, Ibn

‘Arabi wrote with enough ambiguity that even some heretics could find support in his

ideas for a variety of beliefs and he was often called a pantheist. Even so, the school that

upheld him would vehemently reject any of these heretical views and rectify it in the

⁸⁴ Glasse 191.

⁸⁵ Glasse 190.

⁸⁶ Richard C. Martin, “Ibn Al-‘Arabi,” Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, Vol. 1 (A-L) (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004) 333.

practice of their faith. The transcendent doctrine was confirmed for him by his experiences of the unity in forms despite apparent divergences. In the following pages, I will analyze in depth Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of the *wahdat-al-wujud* and then detail his conception of unity as a part of that doctrine.

The Dream World

To appreciate the way Ibn ‘Arabi views the structure of reality, a brief look into the way language affects understanding is necessary. Translation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works is difficult at best because of his constant change of perspective and his, sometimes vague, writing style. Difficulties in this translation are also a manifestation of some of the challenges related to language considered in the introduction. Modern readers, by taking only a few lines into account, are able to make a case for drastically different views using Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. Removing Ibn ‘Arabi from his historical and linguistic context makes it nearly impossible to fully express the meaning of his writings. One example of this is the distinction between imagination and concrete meanings. English treats words differently than the Arabic in which Ibn ‘Arabi composed his works. English tends to conjure only one of the two meanings and has become more and more imaginative since it left its roots in Greek and Latin, while

Arabic maintains a sort of double-meaning with each word containing both a concrete and imaginative connotation.⁸⁷

In light of these considerations, understanding language is foundational in understanding Ibn 'Arabi's works. Ignoring common sense, Ibn 'Arabi would press the limits of the Arabic language to find all conceivable meanings of the Quran. To some, this was scandal, but it nevertheless caused the reader to rethink their traditional interpretations and the limits of meaning in God's speech.⁸⁸ Ibn 'Arabi's goal, then was to help discover a way of looking at the same text through reason and imagination, while at the same time making an effort to come closer to the true meaning of divine revelation and prevent God from being bounded by or excluded from reason. In fact, Ibn 'Arabi felt that all of phenomenal reality was determined by language and tried throughout his life to record the fundamental language of the Quran, which was for him the perfectly articulated language of God.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ William C. Chittick, The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-Arabi's Cosmology (State University of New York Press, 1998) xx.

⁸⁸ Chittick, Self-Disclosure x.

⁸⁹ Chittick, Self-Disclosure xv.

In this view, the world itself has no absolute reality, it is an illusion of phenomenal things that are ordered by reason and solidified by language, but yet remain as impenetrable to humans as the objects of a dream. One is accustomed to accepting the reality of the phenomenal world and ordering perceptions by reason, though “there is but one Reality, which embraces all these attributes and relations...”⁹⁰ This is not to say that Ibn ‘Arabi denied the existence of the world and sought to turn from belief in the existence of things, but rather to see and accept that the world as experienced is a mere shadow or reflection of that which is real. Only in death can one ‘wake up’ from the dream.⁹¹ Death here, however, does not mean biological death, but instead is “a spiritual event consisting in a man’s throwing off the shackles of the senses and reason, stepping over the confines of the phenomenal, and seeing through the web of phenomenal things what lies beyond. It means, in short, the transcendent experience of ‘self-annihilation’ (*fana*).”⁹² Only through this experience can one begin to see reality as it actually is. Again, Ibn ‘Arabi did not advocate a view that there was no objective reality to what

⁹⁰ Ibn al ‘Arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom, Trans. R.W.J. Austin (Mawhaw NJ: Paulist Press, 1980) 68.

⁹¹ Ibn ‘Arabi, Bezels 121.

⁹² Toshihiko Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts (University of California Press, 1983) 8.

people experienced, but claimed it was only as in a dream that one could experience the absolute reality (*wujud*) by the senses.

The Absolute

The essence and foundation of the phenomenal dreamlike world, indeed of all reality, is found in *wujud*. The concept of *wujud* is difficult to precisely define, but essentially it is God, that which is truly real. There are things other than God that are ‘real’ in the sense that they are existent, but their existence is fully contingent on *wujud*. Taken literally, *wujud* means “that which finds and is found,”⁹³ and thus is linked with the reality of contingent beings because they may only be found in the one true existence. Therefore, God is the only truly existent thing, and all contingencies are real only in as much as they are a part of God or an object of His knowledge. This fundamental basis for reality is key to understanding Ibn ‘Arabi’s views on unity because it is in this shared contingency that created beings may find the foundation for all unity.

In contrast to the dream-like reality of normal experience, Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the unity of God begins with a state he considers to be absolute unity

⁹³ Chittick, Self-Disclosure xix.

(*ahadiyah*). In this state there is absolutely no differentiation or manifestation of God and there is nothing yet recognizable or contingent. It is only the pure simplicity of *wujud* that is. For Ibn ‘Arabi, one can never fully know *ahadiyah* for to know it would necessarily indicate a duality of the knower and the known. The consequence of this is that to be known, God must manifest himself in another form that may be predicated in some way.

This less perfect form is where one may find the dichotomy between the *tanzih* and the *tashbih*, which closely mirrors the debate between the exclusive and inclusive views of *tawhid* found in the introductory information on Islam. Respectively, this is the difference between the absolute in its unknown and unknowable state and the manifest aspect as revealed in created things respectively. It posits the idea that God is beyond any possible comparison or quality of any created thing against the idea that God’s essence and attributes are the foundation of all that exists. The dichotomy, at its most extreme, is that of the total transcendence of all created forms set against crude anthropomorphism stating that God literally has hands and feet. For some, this dichotomy is of pure opposites and one cannot believe in both. For Ibn ‘Arabi, however,

it is a mere representation of two complementary and compatible aspects of the nature of the absolute.

God, then, may be viewed as both transcendent and immanent because “to affirm (unilaterally) that God is incomparable to things, is precisely to limit and render conditional the conception of the Divine Reality...”⁹⁴ This is to say that when one links the aspects of God together, they are able to know Him globally and fully rather than knowing only distinct aspects. There is a similar dichotomy of transcendence and immanence within concepts of Ibn ‘Arabi because, within the meaning, one will find reference to a transcendent essence infused by God and also a more practical understanding of the immanent qualities or modes of experience. Ibn ‘Arabi gives the example of this dichotomy in the story of Abraham who was considered the friend of God “because he ‘penetrated’ and assimilated the Qualities of the Divine Essence, like the colour which penetrates a coloured object, in such a manner that the accident is confused with the substance...”⁹⁵ This is to point out that Abraham is filled with the

⁹⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 32.

⁹⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 40.

essence of the transcendent divine and yet remains a contingent creature in experiential reality and the dichotomy is thus present.

Ibn ‘Arabi recognized such modes of being as the manifestations by which God may be known, though he pointed out that any particular manifestation is but a reflection of that which God truly is.⁹⁶ There are “local determinates [that] seem to diversify [God], but it is He Who absorbs every determinant.”⁹⁷ This reveals that the phenomenal world of multiplicity is present in the mind of humans and causes one to believe both that God has diverse attributes and that the world has a separate ground for existence. Although God actually encompasses all such multiplicity, “The Divine Essence discloses itself only in a form required by the very ‘preparedness’ of the locus in which occurs the self-manifestation.”⁹⁸ Preparedness (*isti‘dad*) refers to the state of existence of the individual viewing the absolute and, in the case of the human, his conscious state allows him to see none other than his own form, that is within the phenomenal world, and not the Divine itself. More clearly, though God encompasses all, the typical human

⁹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi, Bezels 85.

⁹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi, Bezels 87.

⁹⁸ Izutsu 34.

conscious is unable to grasp this concept and there remains a seemingly impenetrable barrier between the person and the true divine essence.

The Inward Experience

With a grasp of Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of reality, I will now begin to develop the concept of unity, which hinges on the contingency of human existence. To begin the discussion, one must see how the manifestation of God is present in the world. Ibn ‘Arabi begins his book entitled *The Wisdom of the Prophets* with an explanation of God’s manifestation of His many names in the creation of the world. It was God’s desire to see His own Essence and in “the Divine Order (*al-amr*)...He could manifest His mystery (*sirr*) to Himself.”⁹⁹ God first created the world without shape or spirit, but infused his spirit into Adam that the world might “receive the inexhaustible effusion (*al-fayd*) of the essential revelation (*at-tajalli*).”¹⁰⁰ Thus, “the entire reality (*al-amr*) from its beginning to its end comes from God alone, and it is to Him that it returns.”¹⁰¹ Here one finds the contrast of the ‘absolute Absolute’ form of God, which is unknowable and

⁹⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 8.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 9.

¹⁰¹ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 10.

without attribute, with the presence of being, considered by Ibn ‘Arabi to be a manifestation of, and thus contingent upon, the divine attribute.

Ibn ‘Arabi is clear that one cannot fully understand the contingency of their existence, but writes that “man is to God (*al-haqq*) that which the pupil is to the eye.”¹⁰² That is to say that though people are used as God’s vision into the world, a receptacle for God’s Names to become manifest, they are yet ephemeral and finite. People are at once “...a Verb discriminating (by [their] distinctive knowledge) and unifying (by [their] divine essence.)”¹⁰³ It is through the self that one is able to understand God and ‘picture’ divine existence. While the principal autonomy of God lacks expression in humanity, the objective state of reality is such that humans are indelibly linked with God and manifest divine attributes in the world.

Despite this objective state of reality, it is subjective differentiation and particular manifestations that humans naturally perceive, and the objectively undifferentiated reality remains veiled. Though all perceived things are only subjectively differentiated, we are limited in our experience of them through this type of differentiation. Thus, in

¹⁰² Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 12.

¹⁰³ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 12.

order to know the true form of existence, one must turn inward through a self-conscious process in experience of the divine.

In the process of knowing one's self, it becomes possible to view the self in its imperfect manifestations as the opposite of the true divine attribute. Examples of this are viewing the self in poverty (*iftiqar*) as a contingent being compared to the divine richness (*ghina*) of self sufficiency and considering the self to be in a constant state of change compared to the divine constancy. This is, for Ibn 'Arabi, only a surface level knowledge of God because it is necessarily knowledge in respect to the subjectively existing self.

To know God more fully, one must come to know him through the self in recognition that humans exist only in the sense that they actualize the potential for divine manifestation. That is to say that God is manifest not in opposition to human nature, but as a conceptualization of *wujud*, which is necessary for humans to have an idea of God. Further, this type of knowing recognizes that humans perceive the image and attributes of God in light of their own attributes when in reality, the absolute is beyond such attributes and classification even as God. To consider a 'God' is to subjectively posit an objectively separate being that rules or governs people and nature. This concept must be

eliminated to realize the inadequacy of requiring a wholly separate being and comprehending the fundamental unity that is the ‘absolute Absolute.’

To characterize this state of perfect knowledge, Ibn ‘Arabi uses the concept of self-annihilation (*fana*). In this state, one’s eyes are not “veiled by the Divine Majesty (i.e., the aspect of the phenomenal Many) from the Divine Beauty (i.e., the aspect of the metaphysical One), nor by the Divine Beauty from the Divine Majesty.”¹⁰⁴ The one who has reached this state of perfection is able to see everything as it exists in the fundamental unity of God and at the same time still see the differentiation in subjective beings that once hindered the objective understanding of unity. In achieving this perfection, “One’s material being...loses all its character and qualities both good and bad, and nothing remains. In their place Allah comes to be. One’s self becomes Allah’s self; one’s attributes become Allah’s attributes.”¹⁰⁵ The self as a manifestation of God loses its self-ness and becomes perfectly unified with God.

In summary, for Ibn ‘Arabi, God is at the same time unknowable and yet fully revealed. The presence and being of God is fully other than the existence of man, but at

¹⁰⁴ Izutsu 45.

¹⁰⁵ Fadiman 102.

the same time, a human's existence and being is contingent upon that of God. It is a distinction of the ineffable and wholly other God with the theosophy of religious experience. In maintaining this distinction, Ibn 'Arabi closely mirrors the orthodox Muslim beliefs about the divine perfection of God that keeps God from being limited in any way, and at the same time honors the prophetic vision and experience as representing the divine manifestation.¹⁰⁶ *Wujud* is thus capable of presenting itself as an epiphanic form of experience and all latent individualities become manifest precisely from the movement of God's essence and not by individual efforts or movement.¹⁰⁷

Relational Contingency

Ibn 'Arabi's view on unity with others is also found in the contingency of humanity's existence on God. However, his conceptions of unity with God center on the contingency of subjective existence in general whereas conceptions of unity with others center on human's shared dependence upon God. Ibn 'Arabi, in *Wisdom of the Prophets*, draws out the necessity of this contingency in each of one's human relationships. He writes that "although we are obviously numerous as to the individuals and types; we are

¹⁰⁶ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, 1969) 115.

¹⁰⁷ Corbin 116.

united, it is true, in a single and essential reality...”¹⁰⁸ It is also important here to recognize Ibn ‘Arabi’s claim that God can be known only through knowing that which depends on it. Since the existence of everything is contingent on God’s essence, Ibn ‘Arabi is claiming that we only know God through that which He created in the revelation of His attributes.

Ibn ‘Arabi furthers the idea that humans are contingent on God by characterizing God as the water of life in the sense that God permeates all things and gives them life. He even states that “one will find that all those things that man thinks he sees or hears are in reality things that the Absolute residing in his interior sees and hears through his sense organs.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, every existent thing is alive in the sense that it is permeated by the life of the absolute. It is only the imperfections of a person’s ability to perceive that prevent them from this realization.

Ibn ‘Arabi approaches humanity in two distinct ways; as the human species and as the individual. As a species, humanity is considered a mere microcosm, or

¹⁰⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi, Prophets 16.

¹⁰⁹ Izutsu 143.

comprehensive being, of the absolute and in this sense, is perfect. The individual is typically far from perfect, but can attain a state that is referred to as the Perfect Man.

In the first sense, people were created as a manifestation of the divine names because of the creative ‘Wish’ of the Absolute itself. Essentially this is to say that God wanted to see all of his attributes manifested in the world. To do so, the Macrocosm of the universe was created to represent every attribute and, within this, the microcosm of humanity was created “as a spotless mirror reflecting any object as it really is.”¹¹⁰ That is to say that “Man, unlike the rest of the creatures, actualizes in himself the whole of the Divine Names in miniature, and is, in this sense, a miraculous mirror which is able to reflect the original unity of the Names as it is.”¹¹¹

This view forces one to recognize both the *tanzih*, unity of existence as a possession of God, and *tashbih*, diversity of the world in the human experience. As a consequence of this juxtaposition of its comprehensive nature (that is to say the representation of all divine names) and phenomenal dispersion (or subjective existence of distinct creatures), humanity viewed as a whole is the Absolute, each person serving

¹¹⁰ Izutsu 221.

¹¹¹ Izutsu 223.

their own particular part within the unified whole. To be sure, there is some difference between the absolute and humanity in that only the absolute has a “necessity of existence (*wujub al-wujud*)...”¹¹² but it remains that humanity is a comprehensive representative of the divine attributes.

In fact, Ibn ‘Arabi carries this idea over into his concept of the individual for it is ontologically impossible to think that one individual is at any different level of comprehensiveness than any other. The distinction is found in the lucidity of mind in each individual. One who has perfect lucidity “is completely permeated by the Absolute, so much so that each of his bodily members is a self-manifestation of the Absolute.”¹¹³ In such a state, one comprehends that all other humans are a part of the same Absolute and thus a part of his self as well. The realization of fundamental unity allows one to exist as a separate yet indistinct part of the unity.

Review

The work of Ibn ‘Arabi sheds light on the world as an impenetrable, dream-like reality that is founded in the divine absolute, but represented in the transient multiplicity

¹¹² Izutsu 240.

¹¹³ Izutsu 248.

of perception. This structure for reality is key to understanding his conceptions of unity because it is within this structure of reality that he is able to discuss man's contingent relationship to God and the unity with others that is indicative of a shared contingency. To attain unity, one must turn inward to experience the unity of the divine essence and actualize *tawhid*, thus lifting the veils of perception. In doing so, one will come to recognize their place as a distinct, yet contingent entity and a manifestation of the divine attribute.

TAOISM

The final tradition that I will review is Taoism. As stated in the introduction, the organization, culture, and ethical considerations of Taoism are very different than those found in Christianity and Islam and it will serve as a test case to see how effectively one might be able to use conceptions of unity as a heuristic device in inter-religious dialogue. I will again start with a brief introduction of the basic Taoist history and practice and move on to discuss the structure of reality found in the writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. I will then move on to show how their views of unity fit in to that structure.

The authorship and even existence of Lao Tzu is called into question by nearly all scholarly circles and many legends exist around the appearance and writing of the *Tao te Ching*.¹¹⁴ It is possible that the writings of Lao Tzu did not come from any individual, but were instead the product of a particular school of thought and merely attributed to a specific name to delineate a particular body of work. Regardless, the writings will be treated, for simplicity's sake, as though from one particular man.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Izutsu 287.

¹¹⁵ Izutsu 288.

Chuang Tzu, on the other hand, was certainly a historical figure, but there is no definitive way to place him chronologically. It is even in doubt whether the *Tao te Ching* was written before or after the *Chuang Tzu* (the body of writing accredited to the person of Chuang Tzu) or if they may have come from common sources. Yang Jung Kuo even argues that the *Tao te Ching* is a later culmination of the philosophical concepts found in the *Chuang Tzu*.¹¹⁶ This is in contrast to the traditional idea that Chuang Tzu merely expounded upon the ideas of Lao Tzu and gave them more practical understanding. The resolution of such difficulties is not of major significance for the purposes of this project. What is important is to understand that the two bodies of writing represent a common form of philosophical thought that shaped our understanding of the concept of the Tao.

Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu

Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were certainly the two most formative and influential writers in the Taoist tradition. Both sets of writing came from about the 3rd century B.C.E. and were originally composed in Chinese characters. The cryptic and often veiled meanings of Lao Tzu serve to make him one of the most widely read and interpreted

¹¹⁶ Izutsu 290.

sources for Taoist thought, but Chuang Tzu's "subtle, sophisticated, [and] mystical"¹¹⁷ style has attracted attention in recent scholarship and some even grant him the title of the greatest of Chinese philosophers. Indeed, the authority and influence of these two writers cannot be doubted.

To be understood and appreciated, Taoist writings must be placed in their historic relation to Confucius and Mencius, whom Chuang Tzu did not hesitate to ridicule. At a glance, there may be similarities drawn with some of these writings, but they are superficial at best. For instance, Confucianism provided that a person would develop human potentialities through interpersonal relationships by manifesting the commands of love and developing "his own inner potential for love, understanding, reverence, and wisdom."¹¹⁸ This was considered *Ju* philosophy and founded by the notions of *Jen* (compassion) and *Yi* (justice or duty), which were the disinterested, impersonal marks of the noble one.

Chuang Tzu did not seek to eliminate the concepts of compassion and duty from the minds of people, but rather sought to cultivate such concepts in a divergent manner

¹¹⁷ Thomas Merton, The Way of Chuang Tzu (Boston: Shambhala, 2004) 2.

¹¹⁸ Merton, Way 5.

in which personal spontaneity and responsibility were again present. Labeled by some to be antinomian and against formulated ethics and duties, Chuang Tzu was in fact calling for a higher foundation of personal commitment under which one might “act really freely and creatively in response to the ever new demands of unforeseen situations.”¹¹⁹

In a fundamental sense, this higher foundation was the Tao itself. However, Chuang Tzu would be quick to point out that some such foundation for personal ethics and practical action was not in fact the real and eternal Tao, but an imperfect manifestation thereof.

The eternal Tao is recognized by Lao Tzu as “both named and nameless...”¹²⁰ It is “hidden, yet it shines,”¹²¹ and “empty yet it fills every vessel...”¹²² In recognizing these opposing natures as a part of the Tao, Lao Tzu sought to shake the reader from their prior assumptions of the world. This is perhaps where Taoist thought differs most greatly from Christianity and Islam because it allows for the unresolved existence of contradiction. It is not possible in Aristotelian logic, which is at the foundation of most

¹¹⁹ Merton, Way 9.

¹²⁰ Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition, Trans. Jonathan Star (New York: Penguin, 2001) verse 1.

¹²¹ Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 4.

¹²² Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 4.

Christian and Islamic thought, to have the presence of two opposites.¹²³ Such contradiction is not a denial of truth or relevance of Taoist thought, but a representation of the divergence of Taoism from the philosophy of the other traditions. Thus, the real and eternal Tao is not subject to any of the limits of reason that apply to the phenomenal world of perception. This consideration allows a much more obvious unity in existence because even contradiction cannot divide the Tao. The extent of this will be developed more in later analysis, but this understanding of the eternal Tao is a crucial foundation to the rest of Taoist thought.

Still, it is evident from the presence of certain Taoist communities that the imperfect aspect of the Tao mentioned above was not simply an afterthought. The *Fengdao Kejie* developed out of the monastic tradition begun with the Heavenly Master Chang Tao Ling.¹²⁴ It is a manual that details rituals and living conditions and guides nearly every aspect of the Taoist monk's life. This document from the early Tang dynasty is referenced to show the presence of an organized Taoist community that has

¹²³ Leonard Linsky, "Professor Donald Williams on Aristotle," The Philosophical Review 63.2 (1954): 250-52.

¹²⁴ Livia Kohn, The Daoist Monastic Manual: A Translation of the Fengdao Kejie (Oxford University Press, 2004) 3.

existed over the course of history. These communities even had methods for identifying and eliminating sins from their eternal record. This manual represents the development of a moral code and description of right action in contrast to the typically held view that all Taoist were either against morality or simply amoral.¹²⁵ This community is presented to show evidence of communal organization that results from seeking the Tao.

However, it must be noted that this community develops from a devotion to the eternal Tao. The eternal is not a goal to be sought after because of the fact that any reference to the Tao as a goal is necessarily indicative of an objective differentiation of the Tao from the self. Differentiation of the Tao is impossible and when one seeks to procure the good that they do not presently have, namely community, through action and duty, there becomes an inescapable division of the good from the self.¹²⁶ For unity to be attained, one must understand the eternal nature of the Tao as necessary to their own existence and not something apart from or opposed to the present nature. The more one seeks an objectively distinct entity, the more discussion, disputation, and delineation it will receive making it more and more unobtainable. Because the Tao is the

¹²⁵ J.J. Clarke, The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought (Routledge, 2000) 208.

¹²⁶ Merton, Way 12.

undifferentiated, nameless, simple, and eternal essence, there can be no successful attempt at procuring an objectively distinct state of existence.

Chaotic Reality

I will now begin a more systematic presentation of Taoism, beginning with the structure of reality and concluding with the way concepts of unity fit into that structure. At the heart of Taoist philosophy is the reality that Being is Chaos. The world does not truly exist in the clearly delineated structures and objects that we typically perceive. Certainly there is some sense in which these perceptions are real, but existence as is must move beyond this basic application of reason, which is the force that compartmentalizes and delineates the categories of existence. This supposed reality is, for Chuang Tzu, an imperfect representation of the true knowledge attained by the *sheng jen* (sacred or perfect person).¹²⁷ Chaos is that state in which one's dream reality encounters the true reality and all distinction and self-identity are lost. That state where dream and reality "cease to be distinguishable from each other, and merge together into something amorphous..."¹²⁸ is referred to as the transmutation of things (*wu hua*). This

¹²⁷ Chuang Tzu, Chuang Tzu Basic Writings, Trans. Burton Watson (Columbia: University Press New York, 1964) 73.

¹²⁸ Izutsu 311.

idea is the core of unity within Taoism because it represents the ability of all things to essentially *be* all other things at the same time, “so much so that ultimately they become merged together into an absolute Unity.”¹²⁹ The principle of transmutation, in Taoist thought, can be applied to even the most minute forms of object and every stage of life, even death, because at the foundation for each is the Tao itself.

The mistake made by not realizing the chaotic substructure of reality is that one assumes their self or ego to be “a self-subsistent entity endowed with an absolute ontological independence.”¹³⁰ This common view espouses that the ego is the center of one’s being where the “disparate elements of [the] personality... become united.”¹³¹ But Chuang Tzu discredits any notion that one might have of the independent ego and instead considers it a dependent entity, much like a shadow is dependent on some object for its existence. It will be helpful to understand his argument in terms of the disparity between two concepts: *tso ch’ih* and *tso wang*. The literal difference is that of sitting and galloping with sitting and forgetting. This illustrates the distinction between two very different states mind.

¹²⁹ Izutsu 313.

¹³⁰ Izutsu 323.

¹³¹ Izutsu 323.

Tso ch'ih (galloping) is the typical state of most people's mind. The concept of galloping comes from the fact that despite apparent inaction and total rest of the body, the mind will always be going full speed. There is a myriad of sense perceptions battering the individual at any given time and the action of the mind attempts to order and place these things into some order. This concept is similar to the Kantian idea of the transcendental aesthetic in that one continuously uses reason to order perceptions within a mental framework of time and space.¹³² This action is, however, only that of the self-made ego that works to see itself as the absolute and finished mind (*ch'eng hsin*). Lao Tzu takes this concept further and considers the typical mind to be of entirely fixed rigidity that definitively contrasts the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad in everything despite the fact that such concepts are entirely subjective. The discursive activity of the mind actually presupposes the necessity of its own existence and the objective differentiation of the world outside to the point that it cannot even imagine existence apart from this activity.

¹³² Kant 172-192.

Contrast this with the *tso wang* (forgetting). Central to this concept is the idea of *ming* (illumination) used by Lao Tzu in the sense of self knowledge.¹³³ By forgetting, shutting off the mind from all outside perceptions, one may turn towards a self knowledge that eliminates all the distinctions and typical activities of the mind. Even the slightest return to the phenomenon of objective existence is dangerous and can take one off the path towards *ming*. Here we find that Lao Tzu gives a vague epistemological argument promoting the need for one to turn inward on the self, while Chuang Tzu furthers the understanding of the process by which one may come to such a state. To fully express this state in words would be impossible, but Chuang Tzu attempts to point to the ways in which one might find that they are headed in the right direction. Sitting and forgetting expresses the notion that one no longer remembers or holds on to the steadfast ego of the typical person. In letting go of this ego, one can rediscover his cosmic or universal ego that exists as a member of the transmutation of things. In essence, one becomes a part of the way, indistinguishable from the Tao, when the ego is forgotten and is able to experience all of existence, all phenomenon, indeed the full concept of Being.

¹³³ Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 33.

Categorical Imperfections

With an understanding of the divergence in reality from what one typically perceives, I will now turn to a discussion of that which is the real basis for all reality. The eternal Tao does not lend itself to categorical descriptions and delineations. The simple nature of the Tao cannot be described or accessed by typical reference and language. For this reason, Lao Tzu tends to write in a very philosophical and vague manner that assumes the position of one who understands the Tao and is trying to put into words the ineffability and subtlety of the Tao itself. The difficulty is that the Tao is beyond descriptions and any multiplicity whatever, but to even describe the Tao in this way or to say that it is 'One' is to oppose it by means of reason to a concept of something other than 'One.' Even Chuang Tzu is forced to abandon this form of reasoning in the pursuit of full understanding of the Tao. It is with this transcendent nature in mind that the metaphysical discussions of Lao Tzu take place.

Lao Tzu begins with apophatic descriptions of the Tao to express the difficulty in discussing something that cannot be put into words. In doing so, there is little to positively identify that which the Tao is, but many things the Tao is not. This is partially done to oppose the ideals of Confucius, who espoused the *tao* as a simple set of inborn

moral guidelines that every man should know. It is, for Confucius, a mere principle of ethical conduct. While Lao Tzu certainly recognizes that an understanding of the Tao necessitates some change in action, it is not some human construct or concept of reason that can be so easily described or understood.

Thus, to know the way is to experience the pervading force of existence rather than to know a set of guidelines. The need for distinct rules and virtues is merely a consequence of the degeneracy of man's relation to the absolute. It can be further understood by the fact that all of existence is contingent for Lao Tzu, whereas the Confucian concept necessarily implies that people, the way, and objects have an entirely self-sufficient existence.

In a sense, then, the true Tao can be viewed as though it were indeed nothing, just as it is nameless. But this view is only applicable from a human vantage point because it is so far beyond cognition and reason. Lao Tzu hints at what this might mean in several ways. He says "though formless and intangible, it gives rise to form... 'But is it real?' you ask – I say its evidence is all of creation!"¹³⁴ Again, one sees the presence of a unity in contradiction in which the Tao both is and is not. Still, it is difficult to

¹³⁴ Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 21.

consider it to be ‘something’ because then it is immediately reified by one’s own cognition to be a substance of sensible perception. Thus it is not a negation of a thing that is meant in seeing the Tao as nothing, but it is a positive attempt at referencing the true nature of what Tao is.

A similar way of referencing this idea is through the juxtaposition of opposites found throughout the *Tao te Ching*. The Tao is “utterly vague” yet “utterly distinct.” It is “utterly indistinct” yet it is “something.”¹³⁵ The Tao is said to be so bright that it necessarily appears as dark. This cannot fully capture the essence however, because the Tao is at the same time indistinct and dark, but also is the source or “mother of all things.”¹³⁶ In this way it cannot be viewed as lacking anything and must essentially contain or exist as the very foundation of Being. “The first meaning of the character *tao* is ‘way’: something underlying the change and transformation of all beings... It is in this process, along this *way*, that that world as we see it, the creation of which we are an integral part, finds its unity.”¹³⁷ So in a way, one is left with the seemingly contradictory concept that the Tao is both Being and non-Being, which is not to say that the Tao is

¹³⁵ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* 21.

¹³⁶ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* 1.

¹³⁷ Schipper 4.

utterly contradictory, but to express the essence of the Tao as the elimination of contradiction and opposition.

Proper Alignment

With an understanding of Taoist views on reality, I will now turn to a more thorough discussion of concepts of unity, first with the Tao and secondly with other people. Unity with the Tao may be referred to as an alignment with the *t'ien li* (the natural course of things determined by Heaven). This alignment is apart from the eternal nature of the Tao because it can be found in what is manifest and represents the proper ordering of that which one typically considers to be real. There was a tradition even before the philosophical development of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu that recognized the creative powers and action of nature as indicative of the *t'ien li*. Both authors refer to this as the Master or 'Great Lordly Master' though there is not a strong element of anthropomorphism or theism present as in the other two traditions considered here.

Chuang Tzu writes that all beings apart from man follow the *t'ien li*, but because of the self-consciousness of humans, there is a constant struggle to fight the natural course and disrupt the harmony of being.¹³⁸ There is a sense in which one only needs to

¹³⁸ Izutsu 421.

find inner acceptance of the natural way. That is to say, one may passively accept that everything that happens was destined to happen and find peace in whatever physical situation they may be. This is not enough for Chuang Tzu, rather the ultimate in human freedom is the state in which one is able to fully align their own will with that of the Cosmic Will or order.¹³⁹ Even the slightest discrepancy prevents one from experiencing complete freedom. The importance of this idea is that one may positively grasp their destiny and future rather than passively resign themselves to fatalistic apathy. Having lost sight of anything that may oppose the *t'ien li*, one will experience everything as spontaneous action from inside rather than the forced action of a deterministic nature or Master. In this state, one becomes the sacred or perfect person (*sheng jen*).¹⁴⁰

Again recognizing the importance of context in Taoist development, it is noteworthy that the idea of the *sheng jen* was understood by Confucius to be a perfectly ethical human. The understanding of the manifestation of such a person was changed drastically by Lao Tzu, however, because of his distinct stress on a different form of value and virtue. All of humanity's ideas about value and virtue are certainly imperfect

¹³⁹ Chuang Tzu 46.

¹⁴⁰ Chuang Tzu 48.

manifestations of the Tao at best, but a *sheng jen* is above all, one who exists in this world in a state of complete freedom, as described just prior. Their life and attitude must, in this state, be so distinct from the ordinary person as to seem entirely abnormal or even ridiculous. The egocentrism of a typical person masks the fact that desire and reason guide most actions. What seems natural to an egocentric person is to follow those desires and to accept the activity of reason as fact. It is extremely difficult for one to overcome the course of action that seems so natural in order to subjugate the will to that of the Cosmic will. Indeed the *sheng jen* has no desires and no dependence apart from the way itself and it is necessary to nullify the ego in its entirety to come into unity with such a transcendent will.

For this reason, Lao Tzu espouses the doctrine of *wu-wei*, or total inaction.¹⁴¹ It is the recognition of the inner joy of existence that brings happiness, not actions precipitated by some desire. For there is no set course of action for every, or perhaps any, set of circumstances and the eternal Tao is the source by which right thought may become right action. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to consider *wu-wei* as perfect

¹⁴¹ Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching 63.

action, or that which is so in line with the natural order and state of things as to produce no violence and no force from that which is a harmonious whole.

Wu-wei is a complex concept because, at face value, it may be interpreted as the simple negation of any action, a concept that has been ridiculed by outsiders. This extreme view of inaction essentially imagines that anyone who achieves *wu-wei* would then sit in a corner and meditate day and night, neither eating nor sleeping nor speaking nor anything else at all. It is considered a lazy man's ideal in which nothing is contributed to society and the self simply deteriorates. In reality, the concept of *wu-wei* hinges on completely free action, as defined previously. It is a state in which one harbors no desire or intention or any other unnatural purpose that may be in conflict with the Tao. In effect, the concept of action necessarily implies an individual performing the action, an intentional consciousness acting of its own accord. *Wu-wei*, then, is the elimination not of the action, but of the egocentric basis for any action. It is permitting everything to come into being according to *t'ien li*.

Social Harmony

The moral considerations of Taoism represent the most explicit evidence of a Taoist community. While there is evidence of some organized Taoist monastic

communities as found in the introduction to this section, the lack of a well recognized organizational structure or moral guidebook necessitates that one look to morality as the spontaneous and harmonious foundation for all communal aspects. On one hand, without the presence of this morality, loving and peaceful interaction would be nearly impossible, but on the other, the alignment of the self with the Tao leads one into a complete state of social harmony. Again, this may not be manifest in organized communal life, but social harmony does represent a philosophical concept that can be heuristically compared to the concepts of community found within Islam and Christianity.

Taoist moral considerations are constantly and consistently placed against those of the Confucian school. Confucianism espouses the rules of *li* as the “bedrock on which human fulfillment and social harmony”¹⁴² rest. While Taoists do not explicitly deny these rules, there is a definite discrepancy in their ideas of etiquette and propriety. Taoists found these rules were “irrelevant both to personal conduct and to social harmony...[by] distorting the natural functioning of the human life...”¹⁴³ It is easy to see

¹⁴² Clarke 91.

¹⁴³ Clarke 92.

in this context why many thinkers would suppose Taoism to be mere anarchism with no relevancy to morals or social action. There is in Taoism “a conviction that this harmony is likely to be achieved, not by socially promulgated regulations, reinforced by ritual formalities, but by an inner transformation and a recovery of the naïve spontaneity that is usually associated with childhood.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, there is considerable moral discourse in the Tao te Ching, but it is focused on the inner cultivation of virtues such as softness and yielding rather than conventional social virtues such as honesty and fairness or other precise patterns of behavior. It is again the Taoist lack of organization in rules and principles found within the context of a society considered to be entirely defined by the rule of government that has led many to consider Taoism to be an entirely individualistic enterprise devoid of moral considerations.

A more detailed look into the basis for Taoist moral actions will help show both why social interaction and harmony is important in Taoism and the process by which one may cultivate this harmony. David Wong makes the argument that the amorality of Taoism, as perceived by the typical onlooker, comes more from the “characteristic

¹⁴⁴ Clarke 92.

hyperbole of Taoism”¹⁴⁵ than from a real call to abandon moral considerations. Wong writes that morality in Taoism is a fundamental call to eliminate the categorical and evaluative processes that run everyday life. This means that one should no longer attempt to be ‘better’ or ‘more benevolent’ because these terms can inevitably be twisted for selfish gains. The Taoist moral code calls one to “cultivate that part of [the self] that spontaneously identifies with others, the state of consciousness in which the boundaries between self and others fall away.”¹⁴⁶ Such a state will “give rise to unpremeditated aid to others when they are in distress, not aid because it is a moral duty.”¹⁴⁷ Without an evaluative and categorical view of the world, a person begins to care for others as their own self and “*transcends* the self while never losing it entirely.”¹⁴⁸

The idea of *jen*, or benevolence, became so cold and disinterested for some that Chuang Tzu “went so far as to claim that it was necessary to get rid of *jen* so that virtue might flourish.”¹⁴⁹ It is the process of self cultivation that allows a person to become moral not with rigid laws and impersonal boundaries, but within the context of

¹⁴⁵ David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (University of California Press, 1984) 208.

¹⁴⁶ Wong 208.

¹⁴⁷ Wong 208.

¹⁴⁸ Wong 214.

¹⁴⁹ Clarke 93.

“character-formation, self-fulfillment, and the fostering of human excellence.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, there was no room for personal individuation without reference to the context of all that was ‘other’. To morally cultivate the self was to place it in harmony with all those other selves that formed the world at large and it was with this inner practice that unity with others became a concrete reality in human interaction for Taoists. J.J. Clarke considered Taoists to have an “ontological rather than axiological attitude towards morality”¹⁵¹ representing the nature of morality as fundamental and necessary rather than contrived or secondary. That is to say that unity with the Tao must be the foundation, not result, of all moral considerations to prevent the development of a cold and disinterested morality based on contrived laws and to spontaneously actualize social harmony.

By looking only at this philosophical understanding such an alternate foundation for value and virtue, one might easily deny the need for community among the *sheng jen*. But for both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the transcendent moral considerations of the *sheng jen* are not the only representations of character. As with most Chinese thought of the time, there was great concern with political rule and the *sheng jen* is said to be

¹⁵⁰ Clarke 96.

¹⁵¹ Clarke 101.

perfect within the context of ruling an empire. Lao Tzu discusses this form of rule in verses 57 and 58 of the *Tao te Ching*. It is not by desire or effort that one may become powerful, but by attachment to the Tao people will naturally gather around.

As was remarked above, Taoist thinkers deemphasized any reference to linguistically limited moral considerations in their paradigm. Instead, they found that such considerations ought to have a much higher meaning as a manifestation of the Tao. The *sheng jen* is then able to govern not by making strict laws and codes to live by, but by governing his own self under the principles of *wu-wei* and in so doing the right ordering of the world is spontaneously actualized. Along these lines, it is ideal for the people to share in the desire-less life in following on this path. It is only in the imperfect state that one may be said to rule according to benevolence or righteousness. These are forms of action and rule that seem similar to reliance on the Tao, but again are only imperfect manifestations necessitated by the imperfect state of the people. In fact, the perfect rulers do not even know of their own virtue and neither do their followers. It again is *wu-wei*, purely undesiring and ego-less action that spontaneously flows forth to rule.

In effect, the antinomian view of Chuang Tzu stems from the fact that right action and social obligation are engrained *a priori* in his own system of thought. There is no need to engage in ethical debates because the fundamental answer to ethical questions lies within one's self rather than in scholarly discourse or ethical theory. Thus we find in the *Tao te Ching* that "When the greatness of Tao is present, action arises from one's own heart...If you need rules to be kind and just, if you *act* virtuous, this is a sure sign that virtue is absent."¹⁵²

Again, we must note that, though the focus of Taoism seems to be on a reclusive life of contemplative passivity in complete isolation from human desires and objectivity, there is a sense in which a totally inward meditation will fail in the same egoistic, self cultivating manner of the overly benevolent man. Indeed, one becomes self absorbed in attempting to isolate their personal flaws and align them with a predetermined ideal of the good, but the presupposition of differentiation and a set standard of objective good eliminates the possibility of return to the utterly simple unity of the undifferentiated Tao. It is only by the propagation of spontaneous and intuitive action as manifested in moral

¹⁵² Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* 18.

behavior that one may come to live in social harmony and attain unity with other humans.

Review

Taoism is a way of life defined by the quest to recognize the disorder and chaos of life and place the self in accord with the pure and entirely simple existence of the Tao. The Tao is a representation of the fundamental unity of existence that cannot be fully conceptualized, but is evidenced imperfectly by the world. By becoming unified with the Tao, one is released from the bonds of imperfect existence and spontaneously acts in perfect harmony with all of existence, which necessarily implies harmony with other humans as evidenced by the moral foundation of Taoism. Though the philosophical foundation of Taoism diverges from that of Christianity and Islam, there is still a sense in which concepts of unity may be useful for inter-religious dialogue when employed heuristically.

CONCLUSION

Through an individual presentation of the traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Taoism, I have represented each religion in such a way that a follower of each might recognize the terminology and concepts as their own. This was done to reduce the amount of inherent bias that might come from presenting the views strictly in terms of predetermined categories or concepts. I will now turn to a heuristic analysis of certain concepts to show where similarities lie. Though not changing the fundamental conceptions of each tradition, the structure of this paper is indicative of the argument that I present. The first two sections will represent the similarities in the structure of reality of each tradition, and the final two represent conceptions of unity as a heuristic device that can be used for inter-religious dialogue.

Imperfect Perception

The first concept common among the three traditions is that of the imperfect perception people have in reference to the world around. There is some sense in which what is seen and heard through normal sensory perception falls short of representing the truth behind reality. For Merton this comes from the fallen state of man that has removed perfect contemplation and unity with God and manifests itself in the phenomenal world

of multiplicity. Ibn 'Arabi views the world as an impenetrable dream that humans cannot meaningfully affect. For Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, categorical and evaluative actions of reason misrepresent the chaotic reality of perception and the fundamental unity of the Tao. Though described in different ways, there is a clear sense for each philosopher that the world as humans typically perceive it is not a true reality.

The Real

Since the world of typical perception is flawed and misrepresents what is fundamental, there is, then, some reference to that which is truly real. One finds in Merton that the body of Christ is that ultimate reality. It is the foundation of all human existence and gives life to the individual. Ibn 'Arabi has a clear depiction of the Real found in the *wujud*. This concept represented that which has independent existence because everything else typically viewed as real was only contingent upon this absolute. For Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, there was a sense in which the Tao was the definite source for all things, although they are also quick to say that the Tao that can be known is not that which is real. This is not to say that the Tao has no existence, but to point out that the Tao cannot be accurately represented in any terms of phenomenal dispersion. To

be sure, each tradition has a recognition of the multiplicity of being in the phenomenal world, but this is predicated on a manifestation of the existent element.

Rediscovered Unity

Upon realizing the flawed perception of reality and the presence of an absolute existence, each tradition responds with a call to regain unity with that which is truly real. It is this aspect of the traditions where the concept of unity with the divine can be used as a heuristic device. Merton calls people to remove all distractions of the world and turn inward through infused contemplation of the divine to experience the divine presence and become a part of the body. Ibn 'Arabi makes reference to an inward experience as well because it is only through introspection that one may remove the veils of this world and, in this experience, break the bonds of the dream like reality. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu represent a necessary push towards acceptance of the Tao in harmonious and spontaneous action that accepts and follows the *t'ien li*.

A Global Community

Finally, the correlation of unity with humans to unity with the absolute serves as a heuristic concept between the traditions. This correlation can be found in the existence of the body of Christ for Merton. As members of the same body, there is an indelible

link with other believers that has become manifest in the organizational structure of the church, which is indicative of a world-wide community of faith. The Muslim community, or ummah, is also a tangible representation of community, but it is founded in a slightly different manner for Ibn 'Arabi. It is the contingent nature of every person's existence that links them with the rest of creation. As a part of the same absolute form of existence, humans must necessarily interact in community. Though lacking the same organizational or political representation of Christianity and Islam, Taoism also retains a call to unity with other people in social harmony as a representation of the spontaneous actions of the Tao. It is not only relevant to the individual to follow the Tao, but in so doing one will foster a consciousness of moral duty that makes useless the acceptance of codified laws and organizational or political control.

Final Remarks

Through this analysis of Christianity, Islam, and Taoism, it has been shown that the three traditions present a philosophical framework in which unity with the divine and a correlation of that unity with the unity of human beings can be used as a heuristic device to foster inter-religious dialogue. Despite the obvious distinctions that exist in the surface structure of religious practice and the challenges in comparing diverse traditions,

there are common forms of religious expression that may be found beneficial for inter-religious dialogue and, as a consequence of such dialogue, in the relationships and understanding of a global community. While not intended to show theologically or philosophically identical religious concepts, this project explores common forms of religious expression that may be used in further dialogue and discourse. By heuristically examining concepts of unity with the divine in correlation to the unity of humans, it has been shown that this is a beneficial avenue by which inter-religious dialogue might take place and lead to more thorough discourse and understanding in the global community.

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CURRICULUM VITA

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