

William Haber and George Orr

The Yin and Yang of Religious Thought

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Abstract

The genre of science fiction has allowed authors to address controversial questions that arise in every society, as well as to express their ideas and views without reprimand. This article discusses the taboo topic of religion in Ursula Le Guin's novel, *The Lathe of Heaven*, which contrasts the ideals of Judeo-Christian religion with ones of Taoism. Le Guin's Taoism emphasizes the ultimate goal that one should live their life in perfect harmony with the natural world around them as opposed to the Christian idea of individuality. The novel introduces two opposing characters: William Haber and George Orr, the yin and the yang of the western and eastern religion and characters that represent the two religions as antipodal forces. This article provides an analysis of these two characters and the ideals of these major religions using the fantasy setting of a science fiction novel.

Religion and politics: the two topics that one is instructed to avoid at all costs when engaged in polite conversation. To discuss such subjects is to open a gargantuan can of worms, a can full of slimy, squirmy controversy, aggravation, insults, and offenses. I do not believe that there is a faster way to antagonize or alienate another individual than by discussing these very issues. Despite, or rather in spite, of the taboo nature of these topics, countless authors of science fiction have fearlessly taken a can-opener to these matters in their works and have artfully and unabashedly allowed such "worms" to wiggle free, burrowing deep down into the rich soil of their reader's fecund minds and inviting endless discussion. Ursula Le Guin most certainly had a can-opener in hand when she penned *The Lathe of Heaven*, a science fiction masterpiece that exposes the sharp contrast between the ideals of Western religions (i.e. the Judeo-Christian tradition) and the aims of Eastern religions- specifically Taoism. Le Guin's work adroitly highlights the significance that Western religions place upon the interests and benefit of the individual and juxtaposes such stress with the Taoist insistence upon equality, and essentially a surrender of individual self-hood in

favor of blissful, balanced stasis of being and harmony of one's will with the natural world. As a result of the Taoist framework Le Guin employs in the novel, one may come to view Western religion as egotistical, blindly illogical, dangerous to humanity itself, and ultimately the wrong tao-path.

The genre of science fiction has long been a place in which authors can ruminate on the forbidden questions and ideas that arise in virtually any society, be they concepts of control, oppression, political dissent, or religious heresy. Since the Golden Age of science fiction, authors have been able to cloak such questions, opposing ideas, and criticisms in their prose disguises, employing well spun conceits and beautifully stitched symbolism so they may express their ideas and artistic vision free from censorship and reprimand. It is clear that Le Guin also employs this aforementioned narrative needlework in *The Lathe of Heaven* by depicting an environmentally ravaged world, specifically an ecologically ruined Pacific Northwest, hence also suggesting that authors of science fiction offer readers subtle caveats for the future in their work.

Perhaps even more polarizing than politics, the topic of religion has long been a keystone concept in works of science fiction. However, the myriad religions that are practiced the world over are by no means represented or discussed equally. The religion that receives the highest discussion-to-page ratio is that of the Judeo-Christian ilk, specifically how such a tradition operates and is practiced in the Western world. The theme of contact, be it with a massive and mysterious alien ocean as in the case of Lem's *Solaris*, or with the monstrous animal-people of Wells' *Island of Dr. Moreau*, seems to echo man's desire to connect with entities greater than himself or those which exist due to inhuman intervention or unnatural human invention. Such desires may be related back to the Judeo-Christian belief that a great creator, an awesome omnipotent God, exists and may be engaged in a kind of spiritual "contact" via worship or prayer. It is also important to note that belief in such a God inherently suggests the prominence and importance of the individual creation of man, suggesting that each man was specifically and intentionally designed and therefore is not simply one of many who must conform to the will of others and the universe itself, but is special and can, and should, exert his own influence and will on the world and world events because that is what such a God intended, and is thus His will (the basic tenants of Intelligent Design doctrine).

The above-enumerated beliefs are the exact converse of those held by most Taoists. Taoism is not a religion that focuses on one central deity, that is to say

that Taoism lacks a central godhead or major omnipotent God like the one found in the Judeo-Christian belief system. However, there are a multitude of sects and offshoots of Taoism, which do ascribe to, and believe in, major and minor deities (essentially some Taoists worship gods while others do not). In regard to the Judeo-Christian configurations of heaven and hell and the afterlife in general, some who practice Taoism believe in such constructs while others do not. In a sense, George Orr's last name truly applies quite perfectly to Taoism, given that virtually every aspect of the religion presents a choice or an either "or" option that an adherent may choose or abstain from. Further, such a choice when applied to Taoism is deliciously ironic given that the Taoist idea of wu-wei- "action through inaction"- dictates that the best situation or outcome is the one that requires no action to be taken and no choice to be made and instead welcomes a kind of cosmic "winging it" in which man allows the universe and the natural world to handle their own affairs.

The version of Taoism that appears to be most present in Le Guin's novel is one in which man's ultimate goal should in fact be to follow the tao of wu-wei, and via such a path ensure that his will is in perfect harmony with the world around him. Although George Orr, tortured effective dreamer that he is, claims that he has never studied Eastern mysticisms when Dr. Haber accuses him of having a "peculiarly passive outlook for a man brought up in the Judeo-Christian-Rationalist-West" (82) he goes on to assert that he knows: "That it's wrong to force the pattern of things. It won't do. It's been our mistake for a hundred years" (82). Orr's assertion hence cements him as an embodiment (even if it is unconscious on his part) of the three gems of Taoism: compassion, moderation, and humility. Orr possesses this trinity of attributes, and more over does so on a seemingly instinctual and inexpressible level. Orr's allusion to "our" mistake "for a hundred years" is arguably a criticism of the principles of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, which is a tradition of action and involvement in everything from forced conversion, to philanthropy that wreaks unintended havoc. The trite truism claims that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" and it may also be true that the road to Christian salvation is paved with good intentions that put the natural world through hell.

The notion of the inexpressible or beliefs and ideas that cannot be adequately described via the vehicle of language relates to the state of enlightenment and peace that is the ultimate goal of Taoism. This idea may also be related to the instance in Le Guin's novel when Haber first encounters an alien who utters the word "iahklu" when it sees Orr hooked up to the electroencephalograph. Haber

asks the alien to clarify but is met with the following response: "Please excuse. Incommunicable by communication-machine"(122). In the same episode it is revealed that the aliens did not realize that humans "depend on verbal communication"(124) and thus such a miscommunication led to unwarranted bloodshed and unnecessary interplanetary warfare. The phrase, "incommunicable by communication-machine" can readily be applied to human understanding and interpretation of Taoism itself- meaning that humans cannot express their understanding of Taoism verbally, but understand it mentally and spiritually. In a sense, the aliens, along with Orr, are the Taoists of Le Guin's text, with the aliens figured as Taoist monks and Orr a promising student under their sage and stoic tutelage.

Taoism and its cornucopia of texts and doctrines present innumerable and divergent ideas and decrees and often cannot be adequately translated or consolidated into one cohesive dogma, but instead requires that its followers understand on an intangible and intrinsic level. This seemingly instantaneous and indefinable understanding is similar to the Judeo-Christian concept of epiphany. George Orr understands the immense importance of maintaining the homeostasis of life and society itself in a way that suggests that he long ago experienced a kind of Taoist "epiphany" and does not want to disturb the universe in any way, shape, or form if he can help it. Orr realizes that each and every one of his effective dreams have the propensity and the power to literally rewrite not only his past, present, and future, but the past, present, and future of the entire world. In this way Orr is akin to Atlas, a tragic Titan forced to bear the crushing weight of the world by a man who is a demi-god in his own mind, Dr. Haber, a "Zeus" figure with a severe case of megalomania.

The optimal state of being for Orr, as well as other Taoists, is best described by Miss Lelache when she is regarding Orr himself: "Like a block of wood not carved. The infinite possibility, the unlimited and unqualified wholeness of being of the uncommitted, the nonacting, the uncarved: the being who, being nothing but himself, is everything" (96). This unblemished and unsplintered wholeness that Lelache describes correlates to the Taoist tenets of inaction and human harmony with the natural world. If man is merely himself, he does not alter himself mentally, physically, or spiritually, but instead allows himself to simply "be" and accepts the world and his surroundings for what they are, he is embodying the spirit and aims of Taoism (like Orr). Lelache's remarks and Orr's state of being also relate to the concluding lines of the epigraph that precedes chapter three of the novel, which is a quote from the major Taoist figure Chuang

Tse: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven" (26). Orr proves throughout the novel that he achieves this "high attainment," and indeed does "let understanding stop at what cannot be understood," given that he never actually tries to understand why he is able to have effective dreams in the first place. Further, he does not try to deeply probe his subconsciousness for answers or explanations as to why he conjures up the things he does. No, instead Orr simply wants to make his effective dreaming cease so he can spare humanity from his subconscious, and moreover, have no tangible effect on the world.

A lathe is a "turning tool," a machine that is used in the working of wood and other natural materials (i.e. stone, marble) "that holds the material and rotates it about a horizontal axis against a tool (like an axe) that shapes it." In keeping with such a definition, I assert that the meaning of the Taoist term "lathe of heaven" is that man (or in the novel Orr) is the "wood" that is fixed and worked on, the lathe, or turning tool, is the earth itself (which rotates on a horizontal plane), and the tool that the "wood" is shaped against is the natural ebb and flow of life and earthly existence and symbiosis itself. It is imperative that the "wood" (man) not fight against the blade of the lathe (the natural order of the world and the wei that benefits all) for if he does he will be "destroyed upon the lathe of heaven" (be metaphorically "splintered" from his true, whole self while he vainly tries to exercise control of the uncontrollable, namely fate and the natural order). Ergo, as mentioned above, the "lathe of heaven," is the earth, meaning that life on earth is a crucial test of one's ability and willingness to accept the world and society for what it is. George Orr is able to accept life for what it is, and is, in essence, the perfect piece of "wood" because he abhors the very thought of changing the course of world events. Conversely, Dr. Haber is the most wretched slab of "wood" because he desires nothing more than to change, and have a grandiose effect on, virtually everything.

Dr. Haber's insatiable lust for power is displayed near the very inception of the novel when he briefly discusses his own dreams, specifically his own daydreams, with Orr: "I frequently daydream heroics. I am the hero. I'm saving a girl, or a fellow astronaut, or a besieged city, or a whole damn planet. Messiah dreams, do-gooder dreams. Haber saves the world" (33)! One must note that Haber is detailing the specifics of his daydreams, that is, waking fantasies, and not the subconscious, virtually autonomic creations of a dreaming mind. Haber, unlike Orr, wants to have a marked effect on the world and has no qualms with altering

the fabrics of time and human history itself to do so. Haber's undaunted desire to "help" echoes the earnestness of Christian missionaries who wanted nothing more than to "civilize" the "barbarians" (be they Native American, Asian, or African), and save their souls from the fire and brimstone that awaits non-believers in the afterlife. Essentially, these religious zealots wanted to save the "natives" from themselves, and as in the Puritan tradition that much of the Western world, especially the United States, was founded on, serve as a "shining beacon on a hill," a glowing example of how wonderful life can be if people accept the Judeo-Christian God and join the conversion mission. Dr. Haber is the poster boy for this very brand of cultural meddling, but on a much larger scale- he does after all eliminate race, entrench a worldwide system of eugenic cleansing, and incite interplanetary warfare, all in order to make the world a better place of course!

The Taoist framework that Le Guin creates in *The Lathe of Heaven* further establishes Orr and Haber as two dissimilar yet utterly connected entities in a piece of Taoist iconography: the yin and yang symbol. Such a symbol represents the duality of light and dark forces in the world that oppose and compliment each other in tandem. Yang is the white or light aspect of the duo and represents "peace, stability, and creativeness." Clearly, Orr represents the "yang." Yin on the other hand, represents the dark or black forces in the world and in nature like "confusion, destruction, and societal discord," hence Haber is the "yin." It is important to note that neither yin nor yang represent good or evil, but instead represent conflicting or opposite forces in the world. Just as Orr is "yang" and Haber is "yin" one may assert that Taoism is "yang" and the Western Judeo-Christian tradition is "yin": neither religion or belief system is bad or good, right or wrong, but instead the two represent antipodal forces in the world. Taoism espouses in-action and acceptance while Western religions advocate action and a conscious attempt to alter the world and one's place in it. From a Taoist lens, Western religion often seems egotistical, blindly illogical, and dangerous to the collective good of humanity all because it, like its personification in the figure of Dr. Haber, does not remain neutral, whole, and perpetually passive, not to mention its distaste for all things utilitarian. It is true that Dr. Haber is eventually "destroyed on the lathe of heaven"- the world and his well-meaning intentions for it destroy him, rendering him a shell of a man who can only stare into the "void" and sees only "the bad dream" of a perfect reality he tried to forge himself (180).

If Dr. Haber is the personification of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West than George Orr is the personification of the correct tao that one should follow in life according to the pillars of Taoism. Orr is the ultimate jellyfish: "hanging, swaying, pulsing the most vulnerable and insubstantial creature [he] has for [his] defense the violence and power of the whole ocean, to which [he] has entrusted [his] being, [his] going, and [his] will"(1). Orr, like other Taoists, is by no means spineless, but is instead flexible. He understands the necessity of mental and spiritual malleability, and like Taoism itself, acknowledges the virtue of in-action as a method of preventing unforeseen and deleterious consequences. Dr. Haber's spine was rigid and it was this rigidity and unwillingness to allow life to unfold however it may that ultimately broke his back. Upon being introduced to Taoism in *The Lathe of Heaven* readers may come to view Western culture and religion, with its incessant focus on the individual, as restrictive in its singularity. Perhaps after being exposed to the tao that Orr travels down, readers will see the fluid beauty and freedom of being one of many, a jellyfish floating among its peers in the sea of life, allowing the tide to guide them, swaying with both the yin and yang of existence.

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