

## What is Daoism?

Daoism, also spelt Taoism, is the traditional popular religion of China. Daoists perceive human beings and the Universe as in harmony. Their religious rites are celebrated to ensure that this harmony is maintained, that the human world is at one with the world of nature and its guardian spirits, and also at one with the spirits of the departed. Over and above all is the one God, in whom the Chinese have believed since prehistoric times, portraying him as the "Great Ancestor Above" or as "Heaven".

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### The Dao - the Way

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In the earliest Chinese writing the character pronounced *Dao* is a picture of a person making an offering to the Great Ancestor in the central aisle of a temple. In time the central aisle came to be seen as representing the path or 'Way' all should try to walk on. It was the hidden way through the Universe.

By practising various forms of bodily and spiritual exercise a person could come into harmony with this Way, thus letting its power breathe through his entire body. Breathing exercises were important, as well as deep concentration. Daoist sages liked to retire to

secluded spaces - mountain caves, for instance - and allow themselves to become one with nature. Daoism is the inspiration behind most Chinese poetry and painting, in which people are led to see the beauty of nature, their own smallness, and thus come to a deeper reverence for creation itself.

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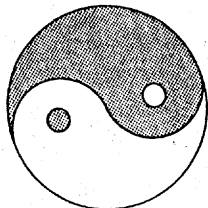
### Daoism as Chinese Popular religion

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The Chinese have always been very religious but rarely think of their religion as an organised entity, an 'ism'. About two thousand years ago various teachers began to gather followers and organise schools. They base their teachings on the 'Book of the Way and its Power' (*Dao De Jing*, in Chinese) by the philosopher, Lao Zi.

Each Daoist school has its own methods of meditation and liturgy passed on by specially revered teachers. Some stress reading of sacred or philosophical texts, some practise different forms of physical and mental exercise to help in meditation. Some seek to help people who need guidance in life while others emphasise the liturgy in the temples.

These schools are rarely exclusive; people go to whichever Daoist they think can help them in their time of need. They will also go to Buddhist temples too and usually invite Buddhist monks as well as Daoist priests to lead their funerals and pray for the dead. Daoist texts do not claim to give a fixed creed or doctrine, so the Chinese are always willing to accept other belief-systems, especially Buddhist doctrines of the after-life.



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## The Chinese Home

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For the Chinese, however, religion is not confined to the temple. Indeed, most people rarely go to a temple or meet a priest. The normal focus of religion is the home. Most Chinese homes are marked with red plaques, statues and incense burners. The plaques, with writing on them, may be found in a prominent place in the main room, or in a doorway. In many British Chinese homes and restaurants such plaques are still to be seen, while in Hong Kong and Taiwan one often encounters a street scented by coils of incense smoke. In mainland China today such plaques and shrines have been condemned as superstition and are much rarer.

Typically a plaque at the door may be to the spirit of that place, seeking the spirit's blessing on the locality and ensuring that human deeds do not upset the balance of nature. Inside there may be a shrine to the spirit of wealth. The Chinese see wealth as a sign of

blessing; money for them is not evil but a part of the good of creation. This, however, does not make them misers; hospitality is of supreme importance and they love to spend money on lavish banquets for their guests. There can be no part of human life which is not embraced by the Daoist vision.

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## Shrines and Spirits

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Different households have different shrines. Sometimes there is only a plaque with the name of the spirit inscribed on it. Sometimes there is a statue, heavily bearded. Different tradespeople have their various patrons; they may be historical figures, famed for their good deeds, or they may be spirits, somewhat like guardian angels.

At times God can seem so remote that people pray to his saints and angels, who may be closer to them. So at Chinese New Year, people make a sweet sticky cake and offer it to the guardian angel of their house so that his mouth will be sweet and he will make a favourable report at his yearly visit to the throne of God.

Another significant figure often encountered in the Chinese household is Guan Yin. Strictly she is Buddhist, but so many Chinese make no distinction between Daoism and Buddhism. Her graceful lines are very striking. She is the Mother of Mercy, her ears always turned to those who call upon her for help. Originally, Guan Yin was a male figure, a bodhisattva or 'being destined for enlightenment', who made a vow to rescue all beings before entering into eternal blessedness. In the course of transmission to China she became female - maybe because people felt that the female image was more appropriate to the role of mercy she exercised.

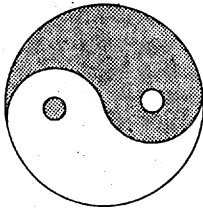
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## Daoism and the Ancestors

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Sometimes it is said that the Chinese worship their ancestors. The word 'worship' is confusing here. The first Jesuit missionaries to China said that the Chinese venerated their ancestors, but did not worship them as if they were gods. Rome debated this question for a long time in what is known to historians as the 'Chinese Rites Controversy'. It was only in 1939 that the Pope accepted what the missionaries said, so that today Chinese Catholics too have a plaque to their ancestors in their homes and the ancestors are mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer during Mass.

The ancestors include one's parents, grandparents and earlier generations of the family. The eldest son is responsible for keeping the plaque with their names in the home. He burns incense before it. When the smoke of the incense rises the ancestors are felt to be present.



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## A Ritual Response to the Universe

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Daoism has its own priests, who pray for the people and care for their needs. They pray in wayside shrines, in private homes and in temples. The temple liturgy is often very difficult to follow. The chants are ancient and every movement by the priest is strictly regulated with its own special meaning.

Yet Daoists are not ritualistic; the ritual is not mere outward show. The priest must concentrate intensely so that the outward ritual becomes a sign of what is happening within, in his own person. He himself must become one with the universe, driving out all evil and welcoming all good spirits and so bringing harmony to the community for which he prays.

Daoists know that the basic relationship between human beings and the Universe is not one of blind domination, nor of fatalist passivity, but of reverence expressed in music, chant and rite. In short, for the Daoist, human life is a ritual response to the mystery of the Way, a way of living in harmony with the Universe.

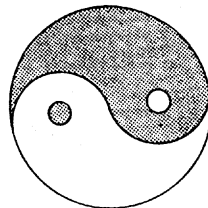
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## Some questions for discussion

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1 The Chinese feel that God is often remote and that angels and spirits are closer. What can this teach us about the place of saints in Christian prayer? Or, indeed, our own ancestors?

2 For the Chinese the home, the workplace, centres for social activities, are all guarded by the spirit-world. What do we have to do to sanctify our world, to recognise that there is no part of human life not embraced by the Christian vision?



*This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The Committee is grateful to Rev. Edmund Ryden SJ for this contribution.*

**+ Charles Henderson**  
**Chairman**

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