

Empty Ways

Christian Prayer and Daoist Meditation

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Daoist perspectives have been largely absent from discussions of Christian theology and practice. My own experience as a Christian is that Daoist meditation can offer profound contributions to prayer, notably when understood in terms of two ideal types of Christian prayer: apophatic and cataphatic.

Apophatic or negative theology attempts to speak only in terms that do not limit the perfection that is God. Cataphatic theology, on the other hand, approaches the divine by imagery and affirmations or positive statements about what God is. Certain forms of Daoist meditation, I contend, share similarities with both, practicing non-attachment to contingent phenomena as they assist adepts in moving beyond the limitations of ego toward direct experience.

Christian Prayer

Fredrick McLeod (2020) provides a useful framework for investigating axiomatic common elements in certain forms of Christian prayer and Daoist or Buddhist traditions. He notes two forms (or 'ideal types') of prayer in medieval Christianity: Ignatian prayer, based on the cycle of days, employs a series of structured and intense engagements with biblical imagery and text to achieve empathy with the passion of Jesus. This is cataphatic prayer, approaching the divine through organized methods and systematic imagery.

The other approach is apophatic. Closely related to the tradition of centering prayer, it has particular biblical resonance in the books of Job and Psalms and in the school of John in the New Testament. This way approaches holiness through emptiness. It is exemplified in the 14th-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, which describes spiritual transformation as occurring after cleansing through regular prayer and study. The method involves moving on to quiet contemplation of the divine, emptying the self into unknowable goodness and merging with the love of Jesus and God—through the heart rather than the head, in a sense comparable with the Daoist notion of “heart-and-mind.”

McLeod compares these two types of prayer to identify the qualities of the apophatic. In part, he does so to reclaim a Christian tradition which has been more prominent in the Orthodox Church historically, and was present to varying degrees in medieval and subsequent streams of Christian mysticism, such as quietism.

According to Karen Armstrong (2009), whose analysis is not uncontested, Christians have insisted on the literal truth of the Bible only in the past few centuries, since the Enlightenment. The emphasis on positive imagination or literal belief, that lends itself to the certainties, images, and narratives of cataphatic contemplation, is a relatively modern development, derived from Christianity's encounter with scientific positivism. The tendency towards literal interpretation of scripture results from applying *logos* (scientific rationality) to matters of the spirit. Previously, Christians did not necessarily believe in the Bible as a literal description of reality—of what has passed and is to come—but rather a rich and multi-layered exploration of the sacred and mythic relationship between humans and God. The notion that objective truth can be measured and defined became dominant in scientific circles, and from there spread widely throughout Western culture and society. (However, advances in 20th-century physics have been largely superseded this vision as the dominant scientific paradigm.)

Although the influence of positivism remains widespread, including in popular theology, transcendental reality cannot be captured in rational-literal assertions that are inherently human and thus limited. Historically, the Bible and other holy books could be approached through reverential *mythos*, and religious narratives were understood as images and metaphor

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containing great wisdom, but not factual in the sense of scientific positivism.

In this context, "faith" may be a better word to describe the attitude of religious reverence, rather than belief in a set of dogmatic propositions. Either way, positive theology and cataphatic prayer work together, since words and images are held in mind through contemplation in order to develop a closer relationship with Jesus and God. This dimension of devotion remains dominant in Christianity—not least due to the difficulties of discussing and engaging with emptiness.

In contrast, the apophatic tradition is illustrated by the mystics, Denys and Meister Eckhart. According to this tradition, the intellect "does nothing" and lets go (Armstrong 2009, 151), opening the way for an emptying of self into the presence of God. In the modern era, since the Enlightenment, this "way of unknowing," although deeply inherent in Western and Christian spiritual history, has been largely suppressed or marginalised. Still, the apophatic approach allows practitioners to reach beyond the limitations of language, to discover a more embodied (somatic) and direct experience of the divine.

The emptying of self is also central to the Christian "kenotic" tradition, explored by Chan Tak Kwan (2015) in connection with the work of the 20th-century mystic Chiara Lubich, and Meister Eckhart in the 13th century. According to Chan Tak Kwan, in both Christian and Chinese mystical traditions "symbolic representations not only prepare for the advent of mystic experience, but they also express this experience and thereby leave some traces behind that other people to come may follow" (2015, 13). Symbolic and narrative (cataphatic) elements lead or inspire the devotee towards transcendent (apophatic) experiences.

Daoist Meditation

The distinction between apophatic and cataphatic prayer appears in different forms of meditation found in the Daoist tradition. Cataphatic practices of intentional mind direction, as well as focused or concentrated attention, appear in the classical methods of visualization, as well as in conscious *qi*-guiding and internal alchemy, continuing into modern *qi*-gong. Each of these sets of practice moreover, opens a path into receptive emptiness - that is, the apophatic way.

The Daoist-inspired Chan text *Xinxin ming*, dating from the Tang dynasty, accordingly says:

Emptiness here, emptiness there,
But the infinite universe stands always before your eyes.
Infinitely large and infinitely small;
No difference, for definitions have vanished.
No boundaries are seen.
So too it is with being and nonbeing.
...
To live in this faith is the road to non-duality,
Because the non-dual is one with the trusting mind.
Words!
The Way is beyond language,
For in it there is
No yesterday, no tomorrow, no today.

Visualisation and other exercises that involve the concentration of attention on a particular object, image, text, or bodily experience are essentially cataphatic. In the Daoist tradition, cultivation and circulation of *qi* in different forms lead to an interpenetration of mind and body, enhancing the development of the somatic experience. As Mencius states, “Where the intention goes, *qi* follows” [*qi* follows *yi*], meaning that mental exercises restructure and refine the internal energies of the person; positive imagery and focused awareness lead deeper into knowledge and further psycho-somatic transformation. Cultivating, circulating and refining *qi* embodies intention and awareness, helping practitioners to move out of thought and into feeling, away from dualism and into oneness. The progression is thus from concentration or visualization to resting awareness in emptiness.

The apophatic dimension of Daoist practice (historically informed by Buddhism) appears in a letting-go of the ego through non-discrimination and non-attachment. This involves embracing Dao by relaxing the self in a state of flow, wandering, or nonaction—all ways to describe the encounter with Dao without the mediation of bifurcated language or particular images. Open-awareness meditation often involves relaxing into following the breath, sinking awareness into the lower elixir field, fasting the mind in sensory

withdrawal, and just being at one in “sitting in oblivion.” Typically, the practice comes with many setbacks, as adepts chase thoughts and entangled conditioning, slipping back time and again into narratives and dualism, while the possibility of transcendence remains imminent.

Matching Patterns

The cataphatic approach in Christian worship invokes God with positive images and words of scripture, focusing the concentration and imagination in prayer and song, perhaps by holding a passage of scripture in mind or by meditating on images, ideas, or words of Christ the savior. In the mystical tradition, this process can move from focused concentration on imagery and narratives, to open awareness of the presence of God, without the need for rationalisation or the mediation of language.

The apophatic dimension of Daoism matches the Christian tradition of unknowing, of faithful surrender to God, the kenotic emptying of the self. It opens a deep well of creativity and spirit, beyond Manichean dualism, and encourages an experience of the divine in the present moment; full acceptance of the transformative love of God.

In both traditions, practitioners’ attention is initially focused on forms of positive imagination. In Daoist practice, attention is directed toward the mobilization and circulation of *qi*. In Christianity, a similar pattern emerges in devotional concentration and imaginative contemplation. Both traditions encourage followers to move into absorption, let go of attachment, and release the vicissitudes of the ego through entering open awareness. These techniques aim to take adepts out of thought and into feeling, softening boundaries and quieting the mind. They aim to transcend the various limitations of self and language in order to find space within that we ask God to be with us.

Apophatic and cataphatic approaches to prayer and meditation are complementary elements that appear in Christian and Daoist practice to engage the divine. Positive prayer, or focused awareness, with its specific doctrinal, metaphysical, cosmological, philosophical and theological content is primarily cataphatic. It tends to represent the ortho

dox or external tenets and narratives of the religion, aspects that historically have dominated scriptures, liturgy and worship across the faiths.

Apophatic practices in contrast are about letting go of the self and all ideas of God, Dao or universe, in order to embrace the ineffable presence of that which cannot be known, expressed, or experienced with ordinary senses; going beyond the limitations of definitions. Such practices are often liminal, that is, approached through gaps in knowledge.

A few years ago in this journal, I argued that Daoism could make a significant contribution toward peace-building and conflict transformation (South 2018). Connecting to this theme, I believe that apophatic approaches can be particularly valuable in multi-faith contexts of religious difference or pluralism, as ways to overcome what are often sites of conflict. The apophatic way speaks only in terms of what God or Dao is not, largely refraining from positivistic narratives and images. Engaging on this level may be a fruitful path for avoiding inter-faith conflicts. With a reduced emphasis on contents, the empty way makes it more difficult for the faithful to take offence, and sidesteps or transcends matters of potentially divergent or divisive doctrine and dogma.

Only by surrendering all attempts to understand the divine through the inevitable limits of language, and inherent categories of perception, can we approach a transcendent experience of God or Dao. How can imperfect beings claim real knowledge of the divine? How can we fruitfully reduce or limit the mysteries of faith to mere doctrine?

Human beings have limited capacities to understand the great multi-dimensional universe, and struggle to perceive the emptiness of phenomena. We cannot capture and reduce the transcendental grace of God or ubiquity of Dao. No shadow can understand perfect form; a finger can only point at the moon. Attempting to define—and thereby limit—the divine, we inadvertently establish idols, including also beautiful pictures and narratives, based on limited, personalised realities and projections. In other words, while the cataphatic dimension of spiritual practice has its uses, it ultimately must give way to the apophatic, so that divinity can be experienced in its transcendent formlessness.

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