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LOGOS AND TAO: JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY AND A TAOIST PERSPECTIVE

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The similarity between the Tao of Lao Tzu and the Logos of the Prologue of John's gospel has attracted the attention of many scholars. Dr. John C.H. Wu, among others, rendered the term *Logos* as *Tao* in his translation of John's gospel into Chinese. His opening sentence of the Prologue reads: "In the beginning was Tao".

The meaning of Tao, a central concept in Chinese philosophy, has developed over time. While in Confucianism Tao is employed to signify the ways of heaven or humans, with Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Tao acquires a metaphysical meaning. Tao is the ultimate reality as well as the first principle underlying form, substance, being, and change¹. Lao Tzu's Tao bears two complementary functions, cosmological and anthropological. The cosmological function refers to Tao's role in the coming to be and movement of the universe, while its anthropological function means that Tao is the norm for the behavior of humans, in guiding them toward sagehood. The two functions are closely related and equally discussed in the *Lao-tzu* or *Tao-te ching*.

The term λόγος, with its twofold meaning of "reason" and "speech," is similarly a germinal concept in Greek philosophy. Moreover, in the

¹ For a concise introduction to Taoism, philosophical as well as religious, see LIU XIAOGAN, "Taoism", in ARVIND SHARMA (ed.), *Our Religions*, Harper, San Francisco 1993, 229-289.

Greek translation of the Old Testament, *λόγος* is employed to render the Hebrew term *dābār*². Thus the Logos of John's Prologue continues the biblical tradition of the term, but some influence from Greek philosophy is probably present as well. Like Lao Tzu's Tao, John's Logos also plays a twofold role: cosmological and anthropological (or soteriological)³. In the Prologue, however, the Logos' cosmological role is stated only briefly (Jn 1:3,10). The Prologue focuses, rather, on the saving role of the Logos, and the gospel proper tells the story of Jesus, the Logos incarnate, by focusing almost entirely on his soteriological function of revealing God to humans and leading them to God. Although the term "Logos" itself, as used in the Prologue, disappears in the gospel proper, the idea of Jesus as the Logos incarnate provides the key for understanding John's gospel.

Even though Lao Tzu discusses the metaphysical meaning of Tao, his real concern is with its anthropological function in guiding humans to become sages. The special scope of my paper is to present the Johannine Jesus from the perspective of a Taoist sage in order to reveal some of the Taoist features on the face of Jesus. As will be seen, the essential characteristics of a Taoist sage – such as being one with Tao, returning to the root, *wu-wei* or non-action, reversal and weakness – are all reflected in the person of the Johannine Jesus. However, as Jesus is the Logos incarnate and the Taoist sage is the embodiment of Tao, before comparing Jesus and the sage it is necessary to reflect on the meaning of the Logos and Tao, and compare the two concepts.

In order to introduce the Christian message to the people living in Asia, it is important to portray the Asian faces of Jesus. One effective way of doing so is to present the doctrine on Jesus Christ in the context of Asian cultures⁴. Much has been written in the dialogue between Christianity and various traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. There are

² The Hebrew word *dābār* means more than "spoken word"; it also means "event" and "action". Thus the "word of God" means the dynamic fullness of divine revelation. Cf. RAYMOND E. BROWN, *The Gospel according to John* (= Anchor Bible 29), Doubleday, Garden City, NY 1966, 520-521.

³ The cosmological function of the Logos refers to its role in the creation. By anthropological or soteriological function is meant the Logos' role in leading humans to God.

⁴ Cf. R.S. SUGIRTHARAJAH (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1993.

also a considerable number of works comparing Confucianism with Christian doctrine. A serious dialogue between Taoism and Christianity is still at its early stages. It is my conviction that this dialogue will provide a fertile terrain for inculturation⁵.

1. John's Logos and Lao Tzu's Tao

1.1. *Logos of the Johannine Prologue: Background and Meaning*

The Johannine Prologue is well attested to have connections with various religious currents of the ancient world, both Jewish and Greek. And it is commonly held that the Logos hymn was originally a Christian hymn, integrated and reinterpreted by John so as to form a Prologue to his gospel. This Logos hymn is clearly rooted in the Jewish wisdom tradition, as there are many conceptual and verbal parallels between the hymn and texts from that tradition⁶. Yet one also finds significant elements in the hymn that cannot be explained only by reference to Jewish wisdom literature. The first of these elements is the hymn's central concept: the Logos. In Jewish wisdom literature the figure of "wisdom" (σοφία) was sometimes identified with the "word" (λόγος), but was never displaced by it. In addition the functions of the Logos in the Prologue, as will be pointed out, go beyond what is found in the Jewish wisdom tradition. The most likely thought-world for the hymn of the Prologue, according to Thomas Tobin, is that of Hellenistic Judaism, especially that which is represented by Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC – AD 50)⁷, even if Jewish wisdom lit-

⁵ Cf. ROMAN MALEK, "Faces and Images of Jesus Christ in Chinese Context. Introduction," in IDEM (ed.), *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ* (= Monumenta Serica MS 50), vol. 1, Institut Monumenta Serica, St. Augustin 2002, 32.

⁶ Cf. C.H. DODD, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1953, 274-275; BROWN, *Gospel according to John*, 520-523; THOMAS H. TOBIN, "Logos," in DAVID FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, Doubleday, New York 1992, 353-354.

⁷ THOMAS H. TOBIN, "The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) 255-256. Cf. DODD, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 276-278.

erature should be seen as the common source for both Philo and the Logos hymn⁸.

Like Philo, the author of the hymn is clearly commenting on the story of creation in Genesis. In fact, the hymn begins with the same words as Gn 1:1: “ἐν ἀρχῇ”. Both Philo and John describe the Logos as being present with God from the beginning. For Philo, the Logos is the intermediate reality between God and the universe, which fits into the pattern of the intermediate figures found in most Middle Platonic systems⁹. Philo’s Logos is called the “instrument” (ὀργάνου) “with which” (δι’ οὗ) God created the universe¹⁰. The constant usage of “δι’ οὗ” in Philo is of great significance, as it goes beyond the Jewish wisdom tradition. Although the word of the Lord in wisdom literature is associated with God’s act of creation and his maintenance of cosmic order (cf. Ps 33:6; Sir 39:17, 31; Wis 9:1-2), the term refers to God’s word of command and not directly to some cosmic principle of order as such. Moreover, the term “word” in these biblical texts always appears in the instrumental dative (τῷ λόγῳ); one does not find the expression “through the word” (διὰ τοῦ λόγου)¹¹. It is at this point that Philo’s Hellenistic Jewish interpretation sheds light on the hymn of the Prologue. Like Philo, the author of the hymn uses the phrase “through him” (δι’ αὐτοῦ) to describe the Logos’ role in the creation of the world (Jn 1:3, 10). Thus both Philo and the hymn present the Logos as the intermediate reality through which the world was made¹².

Along with the epithet “instrument”, Philo also refers to the Logos as God’s “image” (εἰκόν), which serves as the “pattern” (παράδειγμα) for the creation of the universe¹³. The Logos’ role as instrument in creation

⁸ Cf. BROWN, *Gospel according to John*, 520.

⁹ Cf. JOHN DILLON, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, Duckworth, London 1977, 45-49.

¹⁰ *De Cherubim* 35,127. The references to Philo in this paper can be found in *Philo*, vol. I-X, tr. F.G. COLSON and G.H. WHITAKER, Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA 1929-1962.

¹¹ Cf. TOBIN, “Prologue of John”, 254.

¹² The expression: “*through whom*” God created the world, is also found in some other NT texts, such as 1Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2. It means that God created the world through some intermediate figure, that is, Christ.

¹³ *De Opificio Mundi* 6, 24-25; *Legum Allegoriae* III 31, 95-96; *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres* 48, 230-231.

consists especially in being the pattern, or exemplary cause, of the world. Philo, who is familiar with the Stoic distinction of “λόγος ἐνδιάθετος” (unuttered thought) and “λόγος προφορικός” (uttered thought), preserves the twofold meaning of the term “λόγος” as “thought” and “speech”. For Philo, the Logos is in effect “the thought of God coming to expression, first in the world of ideas and then in the world of sense perception”¹⁴.

The Logos hymn, on the other hand, simply states that the world was made through him (the Logos), without clarifying the specific role of the Logos in creation. C.H. Dodd believes that, due to its affinity to Jewish wisdom literature and to Hellenistic Judaism, the Johannine Logos’ role in creation consists in being both “the power through which” and “the pattern by which” the world was created¹⁵. First of all, the Logos carries the meaning of the word of the Lord in the Old Testament, through whose power all things came to be. But the Logos of the Prologue has also a meaning similar to that in Stoicism as modified by Philo. It is “the rational principle in the universe, its meaning, plan or purpose”, conceived in the mind of God and becoming immanent in the world¹⁶. However, as M.E. Boismard points out, the role of the word of God as creator in the Old Testament is complex and may well imply the above twofold aspect¹⁷.

Moreover, both Philo and John view the Logos as an agent of revelation. For Philo, God in himself is unknowable; the Logos is what is knowable of God. Whereas Philo deals with the Logos’ role of revelation in creation and through the Law of Moses, John’s Prologue stresses the revelatory role of the Logos incarnate:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son (Jn 1:14).

¹⁴ Cf. JAMES D.G. DUNN, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1996, 223-224.

¹⁵ DODD, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁷ M.E. BOISMARD says: “First of all it contains the idea according to which God is to create all things; God speaks, utters the ‘name’ of the thing to be created, that is to say its essence; but the Word, because it is also an order, contains an efficiency, an influx of the divine will” (*St. John’s Prologue*, Newman, Westminster, MD 1957, 103-104).

The term “glory” (δόξα) refers to God’s presence and manifestation. What is peculiar to John is that God’s glory is manifested not in a human-like form, but in a historical person¹⁸. The idea of revelation is most clearly brought forth in the concluding verse of the Prologue: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s bosom, who has made him known” (Jn 1:18). John reaffirms the long-standing Jewish biblical conviction, which can be traced back to Moses (Ex 33:23), that no one on earth can see God. This conviction is repeated several times in the gospel proper (cf. Jn 5:37; 6:46)¹⁹. Nonetheless, the Logos Incarnate, the only Son of the Father made human, has revealed the Father to the world.

Another parallel between Philo and John is that they both give the title “Son” to the Logos and emphasize his role of mediating this filial relationship with God to others. Philo calls the Logos God’s “first-born” (πρωτόγονος) or the “eldest son” of the Father. Humans should try to become children of the Logos in order to be called children of God²⁰. Similarly, John’s Logos is called the Father’s “only Son” (μονογενής) (Jn 1:14, 18), who is able to make others children of God: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12)²¹. In both Philo and John, therefore, the Logos is described as enjoying a special filial relationship with God the Father, and he is able to communicate this relationship to those who come close to him.

There is, however, an important difference between Philo’s writings and John’s Prologue with regard to the Logos’ ontological status. Like wisdom in Jewish wisdom literature, Philo’s Logos was on the way to personification, that is, in the process of acquiring a hypostatic existence, but remained a divine attribute as the mind of God. With his theory of the

¹⁸ Cf. Jey J. Kanagaraj, *‘Mysticism’ in the Gospel of John: An Inquiry into its Background*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1998, 221. The idea of δόξα will be further discussed below.

¹⁹ Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1, Palm Publishers, Montreal 1968, 278.

²⁰ *De Confusione Linguarum* 28, 146-147.

²¹ In John’s gospel believers are not called “sons of God” (υἱοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ), but “children of God” (τέκνα Θεοῦ). Only Jesus is “the Son of God”. Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (= Sacra Pagina 4), Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1998, 44.

“double creation of man,” however, Philo further advanced the process of personification of wisdom/word, which had been started by the Jewish wisdom tradition²². The process found its completion in John’s Prologue, where the Logos has fully acquired a hypostatic status from eternity. This status became manifest in the incarnation when the Logos was made flesh and became a concrete historical person – Jesus Christ²³. In the light of the incarnation, the opening statement of the Prologue becomes a clear witness to the pre-existence of the Logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. In the entire New Testament one finds in the Johannine Prologue the most explicit witness to the doctrine of the incarnation and the pre-existence of the Logos, which is presupposed by the idea of incarnation²⁴.

1.2. *Tao of Lao Tzu: Wu (Non-Being) and Yu (Being), Tao and Te*

Tao is the central concept in the *Tao-te ching*, – which means literally the *Book of Tao and Its Power*. The exact meaning of Lao Tzu’s Tao is elusive and scholars’ opinions are divided on the subject. However, there is a certain consensus about the main aspects of its meaning, which can be summed up as follows: Tao is the ultimate reality behind the universe, the law governing the movements of the world, the norm guiding the behavior of humans²⁵. While the last aspect refers to the anthropological func-

²² According to Philo, the man created after the image of God in Gn 1:27 is a heavenly man who is incorporeal and is the pattern for the creation of the earthly man in Gn 2:7. Philo identifies the Logos with the heavenly man. Cf. THOMAS H. TOBIN, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation*, CBAA, Washington, DC 1983, 58.

²³ While admitting some similarities between Philo’s Logos doctrine and John’s Prologue, J. Kanagaraj observes that John’s statement, “the Word became flesh”, lacks any true parallel in pre-Christian thought. In Philo, the Logos never descends from the “intelligible world” into the “sensible world”, but humans must move into the “intelligible world” to encounter the Logos. Cf. KANAGARAJ, ‘*Mysticism in the Gospel of John*’, 296-297.

²⁴ Cf. DUNN, *Christology in the Making*, 213-250, esp. 239. However, I do not agree with the author’s reluctance in admitting any explicit testimony on Christ’s pre-existence by Paul or the rest of the New Testament.

²⁵ Cf. CH’ EN KU-YING, *Lao-tzu chin-chu chin-i* (A Contemporary Commentary and Translation of LAO-TZU), Shang-wu, Taipei 1997, 2. For a critical survey of the different meanings of Tao in the interpretations of contemporary Chinese scholars see LIU XIAOGAN, *Lao Tzu*, Tung-ta, Taipei 1997, 184-198.

tion of Tao, the first two meanings are related to Tao's cosmological role, which will be discussed in this section of my paper. The cosmological function of Tao is based on the important assumption that for the universe to have come into being there must exist an all-embracing first principle, which is called Tao. Just as Philo and John present the Logos as the intermediate figure between the transcendent God and the visible world, Lao Tzu likewise is concerned with the problem of mediation between the hidden Tao and its manifestation in the universe.

In a chapter which is of great importance for its cosmological statement, the *Lao-tzu* states:

There is something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. Soundless and formless, it stands alone and does not change. It is all pervading and unfailing. It may be considered the mother of heaven and earth. I do not know its name; I call it Tao. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great²⁶.

The Taoist cosmology is outlined here, simply but clearly. The opening verse affirms the existence of something undifferentiated, or integrately formed (*hun ch'eng*). Standing alone, it remains unchanging, while operating everywhere. Not only does it exist before heaven and earth, it is also their cause. For this reason it can be considered "the mother of heaven and earth (*tien ti mu*)"²⁷. Lao Tzu confesses that he does not know its name. The reason why he styles it "Tao," as Wang Pi (226-249) explains, is because all things come from it and follow after it. Among all things describable, it is the greatest²⁸. The chapter ends with the following state-

²⁶ *Tao-te ching*, 25. The translations of the *Tao-te ching* in this paper are mine, after consulting several recent translations including: WING-TSIT CHAN, *The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)*, Macmillan, New York 1963; JOHN C.H. WU, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, Shambhala, Boston 1989; ELLEN M. CHEN, *The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation with Commentary*, Paragon House, New York 1989; ROBERT G. HENRICKS, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts*, Ballantine Books, New York 1989.

²⁷ Based on the recently discovered Ma-wang-tui texts, it should be "*tien ti mu*" instead of "*tien hsia mu*"; cf. HENRICKS, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*, 237.

²⁸ Cf. PAUL J. LIN, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1977, 46.

ment: “Humans follow the ways of the earth. The earth follows the ways of heaven; heaven follows the ways of Tao. Tao follows its own ways”. Thus, Tao is not only the origin of heaven and earth; it is also the model of all things.

In another chapter, Lao Tzu describes Tao as immaterial and unfathomable:

We look at it and do not see it; its name is the invisible (*yi*). We listen to it and do not hear it; its name is the inaudible (*hsi*). We touch it but do not find it; its name is the incorporeal (*wei*). These three attributes are unfathomable; therefore they fuse into one²⁹.

The three epithets depict Tao as immaterial and unfathomable. Lao Tzu wants to say that Tao not only escapes our sense perception, it also transcends our reasoning faculty. According to the ancient commentary, attributed to the second-century B.C. legendary figure Ho-shang Kung, *Tao should be perceived in silence and sought after in the spirit*³⁰. For this reason Lao Tzu invites the reader to contemplate Tao in emptiness and tranquility of mind:

Attain utmost emptiness; maintain complete tranquility. The ten thousand things rise together. And I observe their return. All things flourish; each returns to its root. To return to the root is called tranquility³¹.

Tao can be perceived as the source of all things by silently observing their rising from and returning to it as their root³². Thus Tao is the hidden source that manifests itself in the myriad things in the universe.

This twofold aspect of Tao, hidden and manifest, is expressed by Tao Tzu with two different terms: *wu* (non-being) and *yu* (being)³³. The idea

²⁹ *Tao-te ching*, 14.

³⁰ Cf. EDUARD ERKES (tr.), *Ho-shang Kung's Commentary on Lao-tse*, Artibus Asiae, Ascona 1958, 35.

³¹ *Tao-te ching*, 16.

³² Tao is called “the root of heaven and earth”, in chapter 6 of the *Tao-te ching*.

³³ The centrality of this pair of concepts in the *Lao-tzu* has been pointed out by Chuang Tzu, who describes Lao Tzu as “building his system upon the principle of eternal non-being (*wu*) and eternal being (*yu*), centering it upon the idea of the great One” (*Chuang-tzu*, ch. 33); cf. FUNG YU-LAN, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. I, Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ 1952, 173.

of Tao as unspeakable, nameless, at once *wu* and *yu*, is underscored in the opening chapter of the *Tao-te ching*, commonly recognized as its most important chapter presenting an outline of the whole book³⁴. The chapter begins:

The Tao that can be told of is not the constant Tao; the name that can be named is not the constant name. Non-being (*wu*) is the name for the origin of heaven and earth; being (*yu*) is the name for the mother of ten thousand things.

In its textual history, one finds two different interpretations of the last sentence, depending on two different ways of punctuation. Following the more ancient reading, as proposed by Wang Pi, the sentence would read: “The nameless (*wu-ming*) is the origin of heaven and earth; the named (*yu-ming*) is the mother of ten thousand things”. Wang An-shih (1021-1086) was the first to put a comma after *wu* and *yu*, separating them from the character *ming* (name), which then becomes a verb. My translation follows the reading of Wang An-Shih, which has been largely adopted by contemporary scholars³⁵. The two different interpretations, however, are not so far apart as they might seem to be. For in his commentary, Wang Pi explains the “nameless” and the “named” precisely in terms of “non-being” and “being”, comparing the “formless and unnamed” to *wu*, and the “formed and named” to *yu*³⁶. The first chapter of the *Tao-te ching* continues:

By constantly observing non-being (*wu*), we wish to see its inner secret. By constantly observing being (*yu*), we wish to see its outer aspects. The two issue together, but are different in name. Both are called mystery. It is the mystery of mystery, the door of all secrets³⁷.

³⁴ Chapter one has a similar role in the *Lao-tze* which can be compared to that of the Prologue to John’s gospel.

³⁵ Cf. KAO HENG, *Lao-tzu cheng-ku* (Critical Edition and Commentary of the *Lao-tzu*), Hsin-wen-feng, Taipei 1981, 2. For the arguments in favor of this interpretation see Ch’en Ku-ying, *op. cit.*, 49.

³⁶ WANG PI comments: “All being originates from non-being. Therefore, while formless and unnamed, it is the beginning of all things. While formed and named, it grows, cultivates, protects, and disciplines, becoming the mother” (LIN, *Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi’s Commentary*, 3).

³⁷ This passage, like the previous one, is capable of two different interpretations according to different punctuations. The option made here is consistent with that adopted for the previous sentence.

The “two,” which “issue together but are different in name”, are *wu* and *yu*, the two aspects of one and the same Tao. While *wu* represents the hidden, inner nature of Tao, *yu* points to its outer aspect or manifestation. As the origin, or first principle, of heaven and earth, Tao is not a “thing” among the ten thousand things, or a particular object alongside the myriad objects. In this sense it is nothing, or “no-thing.” However, Tao is not absolute void or sheer nothingness. Inasmuch as it is undifferentiated, formless and nameless, Tao is designated as “non-being” (*wu*)³⁸. Inasmuch as it is mother to all things, it is full of vital force and creativity and should be called “being” (*yu*). In order to express itself outward, the hidden Tao first manifests itself as *yu*. As an intermediate state between Tao as *wu* and its manifestation in all things, *yu* transcends the phenomenal world and remains in the *meta-physical* realm. As Fung Yu-lan observes, *wu* refers to the essence of Tao; *yu* to its function or manifestation³⁹.

The order of Tao manifesting itself in the universe is described in the succinct cosmogony in chapter 40 of the *Lao-tzu*: “All things under heaven are born of being (*yu*); being (*yu*) is born of non-being (*wu*)”. Wang Pi remarks: “The things of this world have life by virtue of being; the origin of being is rooted in non-being. If fullness of being is to be attained, one must return to non-being”⁴⁰.

While *wu* and *yu* represent the hidden and manifest aspects of Tao respectively, the terms of Tao and *te* are employed to indicate another twofold character of Tao. Tao is at once transcendent and immanent. The transcendent character of Tao can be seen in the description given in chapter 25 of the *Lao-tzu* quoted above. But the transcendent Tao is also inherent in all things, at once manifesting and concealing itself in them.

³⁸ The Chinese character for *wu* originally meant “abundance” or “fullness”; later it came to mean “nothing”. Lao Tzu combined its twofold sense to mean the formless, undifferentiated fullness, which is the source of all things.

³⁹ FUNG YU-LAN, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. I, 178.

⁴⁰ Cf. ALAN K.L. CHAN, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Hoshang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu*, SUNY, New York 1991, 48. As Chan points out, the dominant interpretation holds that Wang Pi’s understanding of *wu* as applied to Tao is not only a negative one, but implies the existence of a fundamental “substance”, which is prior to “being”, even though Chan himself has reservation for this interpretation (*ibid.*, 46-47).

To express the immanent aspect of Tao, Lao Tzu employs the term *te*, which can be translated as “virtue” or “power,” and is discussed in the second half of the *Tao-te ching*. *Te* is the manifestation of Tao through its presence and operation in particular things. For this reason, *te* is described as the dwelling of Tao: “*Te* is the dwelling place of Tao. Things obtain it (from Tao) so as to be produced. Therefore *te* is an obtaining”⁴¹. By using a cognate word, meaning “to obtain”, *te* can be defined as what an individual object “obtains” from Tao and thus becomes what it is.

Chapter 51 of the *Lao-tzu* reflects on the relationship between Tao-*te* and the myriad things in the world:

Therefore the ten thousand things venerate Tao and honor *te*. Tao is venerated and *te* is honored without anyone’s order. It always comes spontaneously. It is Tao that gives them life. It is *te* that nurses them, grows them, fosters them, shelters them, comforts them, nourishes them, and covers them under her wings. Tao produces them but does not take possession of them. It acts, but does not set any store by it. It leads them but does not master over them. This is called profound virtue.

In this passage *te* is depicted as a mother nurturing all things: “It is Tao that gives them life. It is *te* that nurses them and covers them under her wings”. Thus *te* is inherent in, as well as embracing, all things, manifesting the feminine, maternal character of Tao.

The same passage also contains Lao Tzu’s fundamental insight into the relationship between Tao and the world: that the ten thousand things venerate Tao and honor *te* spontaneously, without anyone’s order. Their response to Tao is in line with Tao’s way of acting: “Tao produces them but does not take possession of them. It acts, but does not set any store by it. It leads them but does not master over them. This is called profound virtue”. Lao Tzu underscores the idea that Tao’s giving birth to the world is different from an intentional or purposeful act of creation. Rather, it is entirely a spontaneous, natural process. As a consequence, Tao in its relation to the universe is free from the attributes of possessing, claiming, or controlling. Lao Tzu describes the absence of these attitudes as “*wu-wei*” (non-action) and considers it the most distinctive characteristic of Tao.

⁴¹ *Kuan-tzu*, ch. 36; cf. FUNG YU-LAN, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. I, 180.

1.3. *Logos and Tao Compared*

One of the difficulties in comparing the cosmological roles of Lao Tzu's Tao and John's Logos derives from the fact that while Lao Tzu has made ample reflections on the cosmological function of Tao, John's Prologue deals with this aspect of the Logos only sparingly (cf. Jn 1:3, 10). For this reason, in conducting the comparison it is necessary to extend our discussion to include the main sources of the Johannine Logos: that is, Jewish wisdom literature and Hellenistic Judaism, especially as evidenced by Philo of Alexandria.

According to the Jewish biblical tradition, "the word of the Lord" in creation means God's word of command or the power by which he called all things into existence. In Jewish wisdom literature the word of God sometimes stands for wisdom, who was present with God during creation as a skillful architect to bestow order on the universe. This latter meaning comes close to the meaning of Logos in Hellenistic Judaism. For Philo, the Logos is a principle of cosmic order. It is God's "image" that serves as the "pattern" for the world's creation. John's Logos is akin to both traditions and thus means "the power through which" as well as "the pattern by which" the world was created⁴². In its function as "pattern" for creation, the Logos is first the Word that expresses the "thought" of God in the divine mind and then becomes manifest in the world through creation as God's "uttered Word".

It is this twofold aspect of the Johannine Logos as both *power* and *pattern* in creation that shows a striking parallel to the Tao of Lao Tzu. Tao is the *creative power* that gives rise to the myriad things in the world. It is also the *cosmic principle* that bestows order on the universe. As the Logos, for both Philo and John, is an intermediate figure mediating between the hidden God and his manifestation in the world, Lao Tzu is likewise concerned with the problem of mediation between the transcendent Tao and its manifestation through the myriad things of the universe. Lao Tzu's Tao, however, includes both aspects – hidden and manifest – in itself. They are expressed by two different terms: *wu* (non-being) for the

⁴² According to M.E. Boismard, however, the word of God in the biblical tradition already implies this double function; see note 17 above.

hidden aspect of Tao and *yu* (being) for its manifestation. The intermediate role of *yu* can be seen from the following key statement of Lao Tzu's cosmogony: "All things under heaven are born of being (*yu*); being (*yu*) is born of non-being (*wu*)". Thus Tao as *wu* first expresses itself as *yu*, which then further manifests itself by giving rise to all things in the world. For this reason Tao is a broader concept than the Johannine Logos. Tao as *wu*, or the hidden source of all things, can be compared to John's hidden God – the Father⁴³, whereas Tao as *yu*, or the manifestation of Tao in the universe, can be likened to the Logos.

There are also basic differences between Lao Tzu and John, especially regarding the notion of creation and the concept of God. For John, creation is an intentional act of God, which, according to Philo in particular, is carefully planned in order to produce an orderly and harmonious world. One finds an opposite view in the *Lao-tzu*. Production of the universe by Tao is not a purposeful act. Rather than creation, it is better compared to the neoplatonic notion of emanation⁴⁴. It is the outcome of Tao's essential quality of spontaneity or non-action (*wu-wei*). Nevertheless, it does not follow that the universe is without order. The ideas of image and pattern, so central to the mediatory role of Philo's Logos, are also implied in the *Lao-tzu* when it refers to the ways of heaven and earth as reflecting the ways of Tao⁴⁵. The reason why humans should follow the ways of heaven and earth, and ultimately the ways of Tao, is because humans, as well as heaven and earth, are all modeled after the pattern of Tao.

Any view of creation is ultimately related to the concept of God. John's God is clearly a personal being. So is also the Logos, the only begotten Son of the Father, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Is the

⁴³ Cf. JOSEPH H. WONG, "Ts'ung Tao-chia ti *wu* t'an sheng-fu" (A Reflection on God the Father from the Perspective of Taoist *wu*), *Shen-ssu*, 39 (Nov. 1998) 47-59.

⁴⁴ The following is a concise description of "emanation" according to Plotinus: "This process of emanation is a process of 'overflowing', the potent simplicity of the One 'overflows' into Intelligence, and Intelligence overflows into Soul... Emanation is the One's unfolding its simplicity"; see ANDREW LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, Clarendon, Oxford 1981, 38.

⁴⁵ Cf. the ending of chapter 25 of the *Lao-tzu*, quoted above: "Humans follow the ways of the earth. The earth follows the ways of heaven; heaven follows the ways of Tao. Tao follows its own ways".

Tao of the *Lao-tzu* a personal being? Most scholars would respond in the negative. Nevertheless, the question remains a debatable one. An important commentary of the *Lao-tzu* in antiquity assigns a personal trait to Tao: commenting on a text in chapter 33 of the *Lao-tzu*: “He who acts with vigor has will”, Ho-shang Kung states, “The person who acts with vigor in doing good is one who sets his mind on Tao. Likewise, Tao also sets its mind on such a person”⁴⁶. Ho-shang Kung’s *Commentary of the Tao-te ching* provided seminal inspiration for the subsequent development of religious Taoism, which venerates Tao as the supreme personal deity.

Perhaps the main reason for viewing Tao as impersonal is based on the way in which it is related to the universe. Tao’s basic attitude toward the world is marked by *wu-wei*: “Tao produces them but does not take possession of them. It acts, but does not set any store by it. It leads them but does not master over them. This is called profound virtue”. Lao Tzu considers *wu-wei* the fundamental trait of Tao and points to it as the essential quality that a sage should learn from Tao. There is an implicit fear that if Tao were a personal being, this quality of *wu-wei* may be threatened. If, however, this quality could be compatible with personhood, then probably Lao Tzu would not be interested in discussing whether Tao is a personal being or not. The fact that Lao Tzu enjoins the sage to imitate this basic quality of Tao demonstrates that he believes in their compatibility.

In view of its mysterious character, Tao goes beyond the categories of personal or impersonal and can be described as *trans*-personal. By “*trans*-personal” I mean to say that Tao possesses the basic character of a personal being, that is, endowed with mind or consciousness. If humans are endowed with mind and consciousness, it would be hard to think that the ultimate source of mind is itself deprived of a mind. At the same time, however, Tao transcends the limits of an individual particular being. It is universal, all-pervading, all-embracing.

⁴⁶ ERKES, *Ho-shang Kung’s Commentary*, 67; cf. WANG CH’ING-HSIANG, “*Lao-tzu Ho-shang Kung chu” chih yen-chiu* (A Study on “Ho-shang Kung’s Commentary on the *Lao-tzu*”), Hsin-wen-feng, Taipei 1994, 36.

2. The Taoist Sage – the Embodiment of Tao

As has been pointed out, both the Logos and Tao bear a twofold function: *cosmological* and *anthropological*. In John's Prologue, while the Logos' cosmological function is only briefly mentioned, the emphasis is placed on the Logos' anthropological or soteriological function. On the other hand, even though Lao Tzu explores extensively the metaphysical, cosmological meaning of Tao, his chief concern is still with humans and their way of life, both as individuals and in society. This concern is related to Tao's anthropological meaning, which is more aptly expressed by the term *te*. As has been shown, *te* can be described as the "dwelling of Tao" in particular things. It is what a particular object "obtains," to use a cognate word in Chinese, from Tao in order to become what it is. By obtaining and embracing Tao, humans become one with Tao and thus become sages. Hence, a Taoist sage can be viewed as the embodiment of Tao.

Just as there are parallels between Tao and the Logos, one can also find similarities between a Taoist sage, the embodiment of Tao, and the Johannine Jesus, the incarnation of the Logos. Here I shall delineate the main features of a Taoist sage, which consist in being at one with Tao and following its constant ways, especially the ways of returning to the root, of *wu-wei* or non-action, of reversal and weakness. Then in the next section I shall portray the Jesus of John's gospel from the perspective of a Taoist sage. The reader will be surprised to discover that the essential traits of a Taoist sage also appear on the face of the Johannine Jesus.

2.1. *Becoming One with Tao*

Lao Tzu designates an ideal person as a "sage," literally a holy person. He likewise uses expressions such as "true person" or "utmost person" for the same purpose. While Lao Tzu usually connects the sage with the ideal ruler of a state, he also teaches that every person can and should become a sage. A true sage is one who is able to observe the movement of Tao as manifested in the universe and follows it. This idea is most clearly expressed in the second half of chapter 25 of the *Tao-te ching*, discussed above:

Therefore Tao is great. Heaven is great. Earth is great. And humans are also great. Humans follow the ways of the earth. The earth follows the ways of heaven; heaven follows the ways of Tao. Tao follows its own ways.

The passage teaches that, as Tao's ways are reflected in the order and movements of heaven and earth, by observing and following this order, humans are effectively following the ways of Tao.

For Lao Tzu, following the ways of Tao not limited to the external or ethical level; for him, responding to Tao implies also an ontological and quasi-mystical meaning. This deeper meaning is expressed by the ideas of "obtaining" and "guarding" Tao. In chapter 22 we read: "Therefore the sage guards the One and becomes the model of the world". The "One" being an epithet of Tao, "guarding the One" means guarding Tao⁴⁷. In chapter 39, Lao Tzu speaks about "obtaining the One", and provides a list of those things that have "obtained the One":

Of old those that obtained the One: Heaven obtained the One and became clear. Earth obtained the One and became tranquil. The spiritual beings obtained the One and became divine. The valley obtained the One and became full. The myriad things obtained the One and lived and grew. Kings and barons obtained the One and became the model of the state. What made them so is the One.

Just as various entities attain their proper nature by "obtaining the One"⁴⁸, a king becomes the model of the people, that is, a sage ruler, precisely by obtaining the One, or Tao. In other words, obtaining and guarding Tao are the constitutive elements for a sage ruler. For Lao Tzu, following the ways of Tao implies union with and conformity to Tao. In fact, Lao Tzu teaches that the cultivation of Tao transforms a person, making him one with Tao: "Therefore he who cultivates Tao is 'one with Tao'

⁴⁷ For the expression "guarding Tao," see *Tao-te ching*, 14. "Guarding the One" has great importance as a meditation technique. Among the several meanings of the "One" in this expression, L. Kohn observes, the following stands out clearly: "The One is the highest unity, the formless omnipresent primordial principle of the cosmos. As such it is identical to and yet subtly different from the Tao itself"; cf. LIVIA KOHN, "Guarding the One: Concentrative Meditation in Taoism," in IDEM (ed.), *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1989, 125-158; at 128.

⁴⁸ "Obtaining the One" is a fitting explanation for *te*, which means Tao as obtained by and inherent in individual beings.

(*t'ung-yü-Tao*); he who practices virtue is one with virtue"⁴⁹. According to the *Lao-tzu*, therefore, by “obtaining” and “guarding” Tao and becoming “one with Tao”, the sage becomes the actual embodiment of Tao.

2.2. *Following the Constant Ways of Tao*

In order to cultivate Tao, it is necessary to observe the constant ways of Tao as reflected in the movements of the universe. The following are the major expressions of Tao's constant ways: return to the root, *wu-wei* or non-action, reversal and weakness.

– Return to the Root

Chapter 16 of the *Tao-te ching*, partly quoted above, is of great importance and is a kind of manual for a Taoist sage. It teaches the method of observing the movements of the universe in order to know Tao's constant way, which is manifested above all in the return of all things to their root:

Attain utmost emptiness; maintain complete tranquility. The ten thousand things rise together. And I watch their return. All things flourish, each returning to its root. To return to the root is called tranquility. This is what is meant by returning to destiny. Returning to destiny is called the constant. To know the constant is called enlightenment. Not to know the constant is to act blindly and result in disaster.

The main theme of the chapter is on knowing the constant way of Tao. Lao Tzu teaches the necessity of cultivating “utmost emptiness” and “complete tranquility” so that the resultant clarity of mind enables one to watch the movements of Tao as reflected by the myriad things of the world. And the “constant way” of Tao is revealed above all by the return of all things to their root, which is Tao. In chapter six Lao Tzu explicitly

⁴⁹ *Tao-te ching*, 23. John Wu renders “*t'ung-yü-Tao*” as “one with Tao”; cf. WU, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, 47. Wang Pi comments: “Cultivating means acting and abiding by Tao... As they form one body with Tao (*yü-Tao-t'ung-ti*), they are one with Tao”; cf. LIN, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*, 42. The translation given here is different from his.

calls Tao “the root of heaven and earth”, that is, the hidden source of all things in the universe. Thus, coming forth from Tao as from their source, the myriad things grow and flourish, carrying an inner drive to return to their root. In returning to their root all things achieve tranquility and attain their destiny. To know this constant way of Tao is called enlightenment or wisdom, which renders a person a true sage and prevents him from acting blindly and falling into danger.

– *Wu-wei* or non-action

If returning to the root is the basic direction of the movement of all things, *wu-wei* characterizes the manner of their return. Just as the ultimate name for Tao is *wu* (non-being), its most fundamental quality is *wu-wei*, or non-action: “Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone”⁵⁰. Non-action means that Tao does not actively intervene, but allows things to follow their natural courses. Spontaneity is the hallmark of Tao, which offers a concrete description of non-action. The oft-quoted chapter 25 of the *Lao-tzu* ends by stating: “Humans follow the ways of the earth. Tao follows ‘its own ways’ (*tzu-jan*)”. When the *Lao-tzu* says that “Tao follows *tzu-jan*”, it does not mean that *tzu-jan* is something above Tao. The Chinese term *tzu-jan* literally means *what is naturally so*⁵¹. It suggests spontaneity and naturalness.

Since the sage must model himself after Tao, non-action, as the emblem of Tao, should become the sage’s most distinctive trait. Non-action means quietly observing and surrendering to the way of Tao by respecting the natural course inherent in things, without making undue interferences. The way of non-action is ultimately a matter of following what is naturally so. Thus *wu-wei* and *tzu-jan* mean the same thing. *Wu-wei* (non-action) presupposes, on the part of the sage, the qualities of *wu-ssu* (no self) and *wu-yü* (no desire)⁵². If one is concerned with personal

⁵⁰ *Tao-te ching*, 37; for an insightful study on Lao Tzu’s concept of *wu-wei* see LIU XIAOGAN, *Lao Tzu*, 105-145.

⁵¹ For the view of *tzu-jan* as the central value in Lao Tzu’s thought see LIU XIAOGAN, *Lao Tzu*, 67-103.

⁵² Cf. *Tao-te ching*, 7, 57.

interests and driven by desire, one lacks the inner tranquility necessary for observing the movement of Tao, and is inclined to act selfishly in achieving one's personal aim. Thus *wu-ssu* (no self) means not being concerned with one's own personal interest. *Wu-yü* (no desire), on the other hand, does not mean suppressing all desire; rather, it means restraining it through simplicity and not being fettered by it.

Lao Tzu's teaching on *wu-wei* is especially directed against the ruler's *yu-wei*, which means overtaxing the people with excessive regulations and interferences. On the contrary, Lao Tzu commends the sage ruler who governs through the example of non-action, which is characterized by tranquility, non-interference, and no desire:

Therefore the sage says: "I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple"⁵³.

Chapter two of the *Lao-tzu* presents a concrete program of non-action for the sage:

Therefore the sage manages affairs without action and spreads doctrines without words. He produces things but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not set any store by it. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.

A similar program of non-action is presented for the sage ruler in chapter 10: "To produce things, but not to take possession; to act, but not to set any store by it; to lead them, but not to master over them – this is called profound virtue". What strikes the reader is that the same description of non-action is literally repeated in chapter 51, cited above, where Lao Tzu praises the "profound virtue" of Tao it-self⁵⁴. It is clear that for

⁵³ *Tao-te ching*, 57.

⁵⁴ Some scholars suspect the same passage found in chapter 10 to be a repetition by misplacing the bamboo tablets of the manuscript. However, similar wording is also found in chapter 10 (text B) of the Ma-wang-tui silk texts; see HENRICKS, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*, 207.

Lao Tzu the sage is an ideal ruler who embodies and manifests Tao, by living out its ways of *tzu-jan* and *wu-wei*.

– Reversal and Weakness

Closely related to the ideas of *tzu-jan* and *wu-wei* is another pair of basic attributes of Tao: *reversal* and *weakness*. As stated in chapter 40: “Reversal is the movement of Tao. Weakness is the function of Tao”. As the movement of Tao, reversal is also described in another chapter: “Great (Tao) means on-going; on-going means far-reaching; far-reaching means reversing (*fan*)”⁵⁵. The movement of Tao is not linear, but circular. There are things which, apparently opposite, are in reality relative and complementary to one another⁵⁶. Paradoxically, great things often resemble their opposites⁵⁷. Reversal as the movement of Tao is often reflected in the changing phenomena of the world⁵⁸. Tao’s law of reversal tends to balance uneven situations

Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow? What is high is brought down, and what is low is raised up. So, too, from those who have too much, Tao takes away, and those who are deficient it augments⁵⁹.

Since phenomenal changes in the world are governed by the law of reversal, the sage, enlightened by this law, must act in a manner opposite to what he wishes to achieve. This does not mean that the *Lao-tzu* exalts secret plotting. He simply describes what happens:

He [the sage] does not show himself; therefore he is luminous. He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent. He does not boast himself; therefore he is given credit. He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long. It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him⁶⁰.

⁵⁵ *Tao-te ching*, 25.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Tao-te ching*, 2.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Tao-te ching*, 41.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Tao-te ching*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Tao-te ching*, 77.

⁶⁰ *Tao-te ching*, 22.

Likewise: “Therefore the sage never strives for the great, and yet the great is achieved”⁶¹. The Taoist sage is thus characterized by modesty and taciturnity, reaping achievements precisely by not aiming at them.

If the characteristic “movement” of Tao is *reversal*, the typical expression of its “function” is *weakness*. The opposite of weakness is strength. As most people in the world want to be strong, few understand that strength and power are perilous. Thus, the *Lao-tzu* gives the following warning:

Hardness and rigidity are associated with death. Softness and weakness are associated with life. Powerful weapons will not win; massive trees will be cut down⁶².

However, the weakness recommended by the *Lao-tzu* is a weakness that overcomes strength: “The soft and the weak win over the hard and the strong”⁶³. Lao Tzu evokes the image of water to illustrate his point: “Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water; but when it attacks things hard and resistant, there is nothing superior to it”⁶⁴. Real strength means inner strength, achieved through practicing the weakness recommended by the *Lao-tzu*: “One who overcomes himself is strong”; or “to keep to the soft is called strength”⁶⁵.

3. The Johannine Jesus and a Taoist Sage

At the climax of the Prologue to his gospel, John makes a most striking statement: “The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). In his Prologue John is far more concerned with the Logos’ soteriological role, which is carried out especially by the Logos incarnate. As the only Son of the Father, the incarnate Word reveals the Father to the world (1:14,18). He also enables those who receive him, that is, those who believe in his name, to become children of God (1:12). In the gospel proper, John continues to tell the story of Jesus Christ, the Logos incar-

⁶¹ *Tao-te ching*, 63.

⁶² *Tao-te ching*, 76.

⁶³ *Tao-te ching*, 36.

⁶⁴ *Tao-te ching*, 78.

⁶⁵ *Tao-te ching*, 33, 52.

nate, expounding his role of revealing the Father and bestowing salvation on humankind.

Can one find a similar doctrine of incarnation in the *Tao-te ching*? For Lao Tzu, the sage is a person who has obtained Tao, guards it, and becomes one with it. This view of the sage as the embodiment and manifestation of Tao bears some resemblance to the Christian idea of the incarnation⁶⁶. Thus it is not surprising that later religious Taoism began to perceive Lao Tzu himself as the perfect embodiment or incarnation of Tao, and ultimately to venerate him as deity⁶⁷.

3.1. *Return to the Father and Wu-wei (Non-action)*

The return of all things to the root manifests the constant way of Tao while *wu-wei* is the manner that characterizes this return movement. Hence, a sage is one who constantly returns to Tao as to his root in the attitude of *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei*, or non-action, means not following one's own way, but being totally open to the ways of Tao with utmost attention and responsiveness. In Jesus Christ one finds a perfect example of non-action inasmuch as he came to this world not to do his own will, but to accomplish the will of the Father. Jesus is also one who constantly returns to the Father as to his source and root.

John concludes his Prologue with the following verse: "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's bosom (εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς), who has made him known". According to Ignace de la Potterie, the Greek phrase "εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς" has a dynamic meaning and should be rendered as "turned toward the bosom of the Father". Likewise, the expression "πρὸς τὸν Θεόν" usually translated as "with God," in the opening verse of the Prologue, indicates a *movement* and should be translated as "turned toward God"⁶⁸. Thus the final verse of

⁶⁶ Cf. YUEN PU-CHIA, *Lao-Tzu yü Chi-Tu* (Lao Tzu and Christ), Chung-kuo she-k'e, Beijing 1997, 27-29.

⁶⁷ Cf. LIVIA KOHN, "Embodiment and Transcendence in Medieval Taoism," in R. MALEK (ed.), *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1, 77-83.

⁶⁸ IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, *La vérité dans Saint Jean*, vol. I, Biblical Institute Press, Rome 1977, 228. Cf. F.J. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, 42. The author remarks: "It is often denied that in the *koine* Greek of the New Testament the preposition *pros* followed

the Prologue echoes its opening verse. Just as the Word was turned toward God the Father in a loving dialogue from eternity, after the incarnation, the historical Jesus revealed this loving relationship by constantly turning toward the bosom of the Father, in total dedication and surrender⁶⁹.

The final verse, therefore, not only forms the conclusion to the Prologue, it also introduces the central theme of the entire gospel, which is a narrative about the only Son of God revealing the Father by constantly turning toward the bosom of the Father during his earthly life. This theme is explicitly announced at the start of chapter thirteen, which marks the beginning of the account of the Last Supper:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father... knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God... (13:1-3)⁷⁰.

At the center of Jesus' being is the consciousness of coming from and returning to the Father. It is probably true to say that some of the assertions of the Johannine Jesus about his intimate relationship with God have been colored by the Evangelist's own theological reflection in the light of the resurrection. However, following the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner defends the philosophical thesis of the unity of being and knowing based on the inner luminosity of being itself. According to this view, Jesus' self-consciousness is but the cognitive aspect of the ontological reality of the incarnation itself⁷¹. Hence, the

by the accusative retained this idea of 'motion toward'. The intimacy of the overall context must determine what is possible, however much the Greek of the time may have lost some of these nuances".

⁶⁹ Cf. DE LA POTTERIE, *La vérité dans Saint Jean*, vol. I, 228-239; MOLONEY, *Gospel of John*, 46-47.

⁷⁰ This idea is also expressed by Jesus himself during his final discourse: "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father" (Jn 16:28).

⁷¹ Cf. KARL RAHNER, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ", in IDEM, *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, Seabury, New York 1966, 205-208.

earthly Jesus already possessed the basic consciousness of his own identity, even though this consciousness was capable of growth and development, passing from an implicit to the more explicit levels of consciousness, just as in other human beings⁷².

Jesus views his earthly life as a mission from the Father. He describes the Father as the one who sent him, and understands himself as one sent by the Father to accomplish a particular objective⁷³. The high point of the mission, called his “hour” (ὥρα)⁷⁴, is his “Passover” from this world to the Father through his passion, death and resurrection. Jesus declared himself to have come for this very “hour” (12:27), and interpreted the fulfillment of the mission entrusted by the Father as an expression of loving obedience (14:31), to be consummated by his dying on the cross (19:30). Moreover, Jesus’ statements about his origin and destiny were not limited to the final hours of his life. The theme was stated and restated many times during his public ministry, forming the main topic of his debates with the Jews during their feasts (cf. 7:28-29; 8:23; 10:36). Jesus’ vivid sense of coming from and returning to God is in harmony with the Taoist contemplative vision, according to which the sage is able to see himself, along with all things, deriving from and returning to Tao as their ultimate source and root.

Jesus’ sense of origin and destiny is coupled with a profound sense of total dependence on God, which can be compared to the *wu-wei* of a Taoist sage in his total response to Tao. Jesus does nothing on his own, but constantly observes everything the Father does, and acts accordingly:

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (5:19).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 210-215; cf. JOSEPH WONG, “Karl Rahner on the Consciousness of Jesus: Implications and Assessments”, *Salesianum* 48 (1986) 255-279.

⁷³ These themes run through the Gospel: Jesus is the “sent one” (πέμπω, ἀποστέλλω) of the Father, accomplishing, or “bringing to perfection” (τελειόω, τελέω) the “work” (τὸ ἔργον) which the Father gave him to do. For references see FRANCIS J. MOLONEY, “Johannine Theology”, in RAYMOND E. BROWN ET AL. (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, G. Chapman, London 1990, 1420.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the term “hour” (ὥρα) as used by John see BROWN, *Gospel according to John*, 517-518.

Jesus states that he did not come to do his own work, but to accomplish the work entrusted to him by the Father (5:36; 10:37). Jesus also declares that his teaching does not come from himself, but from the one who sent him (7:16); he teaches what he has heard from God (8:26-28). The program of Jesus' life can be summed up in the following statement: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (6:38). Jesus' constantly looking away from himself and turning toward the Father, both in what he did and what he said, resembles the perfect non-action of an ideal Taoist sage who is "without self" (*wu-ssu*) and "without desire" (*wu-yü*), but follows the ways of Tao with utmost attention and availability. Jesus' non-action, like that of a Taoist sage, can be described as an "active passivity". He constantly observed the Father's saving design and embraced it with loving dedication, even to the point of death.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Jesus and a Taoist sage. Whereas the sage responds to the ways of Tao as manifested in the order of the universe, Jesus responds to the Father's loving design for humankind as it is manifested in salvation history. As this difference will be further discussed, it suffices here to clarify briefly the idea of God's saving design, which may appear as contrary to that of non-action. In reality, however, the Father's purpose is to lead humanity and the entire creation back to himself, source and root of all things. Just as Lao Tzu considers "returning to the root" the destiny of all things, the Father's saving design aims at nothing other than the home-coming of humans and all things to himself as their final goal and destiny. For this reason God's saving design, which is in harmony with the deepest aspiration of humans and the nature of all things, corresponds to the idea of non-action.

3.2. *Reversal and Weakness*

In connection with non-action, "reversal" and "weakness" are two other characteristics of Tao that the sage is instructed to imitate. These two distinctive traits can be found combined in a peculiar term of John's gospel: the term "glory" (δόξα). The Greek word δόξα translates the Hebrew term *kābôd*. Applied to God, *kābôd* means the visible manifestation of God's presence, especially in acts of power. These elements offer

important background for the Johannine use of the term⁷⁵. In John the theme of Jesus' glorification is closely related to that of his "hour" (12:23,28; 13:32; 17:1). As Raymond Brown observes, John conceives of passion, death and resurrection as the one "hour," and, therefore, sees the theme of glory throughout the entire hour⁷⁶. The idea of Christ's glory is also connected to the idea of his being "lifted up" (8:28; 12:32). To indicate Jesus' glorification on the cross John uses the Greek word ὑψωθῆναι, which has a double meaning: "to lift up physically" and "to exalt". Thus, by using several key terms, opposite elements – such as humiliation and exaltation, ignominy and glory, death and resurrection – are all joined in one, under the idea of the "hour" of Jesus' "glorification".

In passing from passion and death to resurrection, the process of reversal, which is characteristic of Tao's movement, has completed a full cycle. However, the glory of the resurrection is hidden from Jesus until the very moment of his death. It requires faith on the part of Jesus, the true sage, to surrender himself to this mysterious pattern of reversal in the working of God. Through Jesus' total self-giving to the point of death, the cross becomes the supreme moment of the self-manifestation (δόξα) of God as self-giving love that brings salvation (3:16). It is a self-manifestation through self-effacement. Thus the cross is at once manifestation and concealment: it both reveals and veils the glory of God. Manifestation through concealment is precisely the characteristic way of Tao. As *wu* (non-being), Tao can best manifest itself through self-concealment.

In addition to "reversal", John's concept of glory also implies the idea of "weakness", a special mark of Tao's functioning. The lifting up on the cross is an exaltation through utmost humiliation – the mocked enthronement of one proclaimed "king of the Jews". Jesus on the cross appears to be a symbol of powerlessness. As is found in a Taoist sage, however, Jesus' weakness is coupled with inner strength that overcomes the strong. Jesus himself solemnly declared that he possesses the power to lay down his life and to take it up again: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up

⁷⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 503.

⁷⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 504.

again” (10:18). Jesus also told the disciples that the ruler of this world was coming but had no power over him; he surrendered himself to the evil-doers out of obedience to the Father’s command (14:30-31)⁷⁷. Later on he declared that the ruler of this world had been condemned (16:11). The apparent victory of Satan at the moment of Jesus’ death only led to Satan’s final defeat through Jesus’ resurrection. The paschal mystery of Christ is a perfect case in which the weakness of a sage overcomes the power of evil.

3.3. *One with the Father*

Closely joined to his sense of origin and destiny is Jesus’ sense of profound union with the Father, which can be described as a unitive experience. In chapter 10 of John’s gospel, Christ makes a great declaration: “The Father and I are one” (10:30). In the same passage Jesus defines this unity as mutual immanence, manifested by a unity of activity (10:37-38). The same ideas of mutual immanence and unity of activity are also found in the discourse during the Last Supper. In reply to Philip’s request to show them the Father, Jesus proclaimed:

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (14:9, 10).

Two things become clear from these passages. First, the unity between Jesus and the Father is based on a reciprocal immanence so complete that to see Jesus is tantamount to seeing the Father. In his reflection on the theology of symbolic realities, K. Rahner writes that all of Christology can be presented as an exegesis of the one Johannine saying: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”. For Rahner, Jesus Christ is the “real symbol” (*Realsymbol*) of the Father that renders him truly present and manifest⁷⁸. Second, the unity is conceived as a dynamic, rather

⁷⁷ Similarly he told Pilate: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19.11).

⁷⁸ Cf. KARL RAHNER, “The Theology of the Symbol”, in IDEM, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, Seabury, New York 1974, 237-240. Rahner’s “real symbol” has the

than static, relation. It consists in an activity originating with the Father and manifested in the Son, who is the proximate agent. It may be described as obedience to the Father's word, or imitation of his works. But at bottom, as C.H. Dodd remarks, it is nothing so external as mere obedience or imitation⁷⁹. Ultimately, the unity of activity is based on their sharing in one life: "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (5:26). As Jesus testifies in the discourse on the bread of life, it is one and the same life that they have in common: "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father..." (6:57). The expression to live "because of the Father" (διὰ τὸν πατέρα) has a deep meaning, which acknowledges the Father as the source and principle of Jesus' life⁸⁰.

Jesus' sense of living the very life of the Father is echoed by the unitive experience of a Taoist sage who, having obtained Tao, has a profound sense of Tao dwelling in him as the principle of his life. But Jesus' role goes beyond that of a Taoist sage. While the sage offers a model for other people's relation with Tao, it is not necessary, according to Lao Tzu, to enter into a close relationship with the sage in order to attain union with Tao. On the contrary, Jesus presents himself as the way to the Father: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). The relation of Jesus and the Father is explicitly treated as the archetype and source of Jesus' relation with his disciples, as well as theirs with the Father⁸¹. Those who love Jesus and keep his word will be loved by the Father and Jesus; they will come to dwell in them (14:21-23).

Just as Jesus' unity with the Father is manifested by doing the Father's work, so the union of the disciples with Jesus will manifest itself in doing his works (14:12). This unity of activity is again based on a vital

meaning of a real *embodiment* that renders something truly present and manifest. For an exposition of Rahner's ontology of the symbol see JOSEPH H. WONG, *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner*, LAS, Rome 1984, 75-82.

⁷⁹ C.H. DODD, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 194.

⁸⁰ Cf. BROWN, *Gospel according to John*, 283; Here, according to Brown, διὰ with the accusative does not mean "for the sake of", but "by means of". It means that the Father is the source of Jesus' life.

⁸¹ Cf. DODD, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 195.

union, explained by the imagery of the vine: “I am the vine, you are the branches” (15:5). In line with this imagery, Jesus declares in the discourse on the bread of life that he and the disciples share the same life, which ultimately comes from the Father: “Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (6:57). The phrase “because of me” (δι’ ἐμέ) parallels the expression “because of the Father” (διὰ τὸν πατέρα); it means having Jesus as one’s own principle of life, just as the Father is the principle of life for Jesus⁸². The life flowing from the Father, through Jesus to the Christian, is the Holy Spirit. R. Brown contends that John presents the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, as the personal presence of the risen Jesus in the Christian⁸³. The Holy Spirit as agent of divine immanence can be compared to Lao Tzu’s *te*, the indwelling of Tao in particular beings. The maternal, feminine character of *te* also resonates with the Holy Spirit as representing the feminine aspect of God⁸⁴.

Thus, Jesus’ union with the Father not only serves as archetype for the disciples’ union with God; Jesus himself communicates his intimate relationship with the Father to the disciples. This soteriological role of Christ is already announced in the Prologue of John’s gospel: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1:12)⁸⁵. The case of a Taoist sage is different. By obtaining and guarding Tao, the sage becomes a model for all, but, according to the *Lao-tzu*, a relationship with the sage is not a prerequisite

⁸² A similar parallel structure of relationship is found in Jn 10:14-15, where Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”. For the profound meaning of “to know” in John see DODD, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 151-169.

⁸³ BROWN, *The Gospel according to John*, 1139.

⁸⁴ Cf. DONALD GELPI, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD 1984.

⁸⁵ Some commentators consider this verse as standing at the center of the Prologue; Cf. BRUNO BARNHART, *The Good Wine: Reading John from the Center*, Paulist Press, New York 1993, 47. Reflecting on this verse, the author states: “The central expression ‘children of God’ expresses the core of the *unitive new creation*: that is, its reality in those who believe in Jesus, those who ‘receive him’. To receive him is to receive him in the unitive mode, since he is the unitive Word, unitive Person: it is to become one with him, and in him to become one with God, and so to become simply *one*” (p. 56).

for obtaining Tao⁸⁶. Thus, the anthropological function of Tao is direct and immediate. Paradoxically, Jesus' mediation to the Father is just as direct and immediate. As the "real symbol" of God, Jesus accomplishes a "mediation to immediacy"⁸⁷, which works through the principle of identity with God. This identity with the divine, manifested through Jesus' "I am" statements, brings the disciples into the same divine immediacy⁸⁸.

At this point, one may wonder whether our comparison of Jesus with the Taoist sage should not be carried further, and be completed by a comparison between the Johannine Jesus and Tao, the first principle. We have shown the distinction as well as similarity between the idea of "embodiment of Tao" and that of "incarnation of the Logos". Whereas Lao Tzu believes that all humans can become sages, or embodiments of Tao, John teaches that only Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the Logos, the "only begotten" of the Father, while other people can become children of God by being united with Jesus.

There is another basic difference between Jesus and a Taoist sage. Constantly turned toward the bosom of the Father, Jesus lived in an unceasing loving dialogue with the Father, in total submission to his loving design for the salvation of humankind. Jesus responded to the saving design of the Father as manifested in the history of salvation, especially in his dealings with the chosen people. On the other hand, as was mentioned

⁸⁶ Subsequent religious Taoism considers Lao Tzu himself as *the* embodiment or incarnation of Tao and, for this reason, teaches that a personal relationship with Lao Tzu is necessary for attaining union with Tao.

⁸⁷ Describing the nature of a real symbol, Rahner states: "For the true and proper symbol, being an intrinsic moment of the thing itself has a function of mediation which is not at all opposed in reality to the immediacy of what is meant by it, but is a mediation to immediacy" ("Theology of Symbol", *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 244). In another article Rahner states that the risen Lord remains "truly and perpetually the mediator to the immediacy of God"; cf. "Dogmatic Questions on Easter," *ibid.*, 131-133.

⁸⁸ The "I am" statements of Jesus in John can be distinguished into two kinds: without predicate complement or with predicate complement. While the absolute "I am" statements, that is, those without predicate complement, are understood as closely linked to the revelation of God in and through Jesus, those sayings with expressed predicate complement are more closely associated with Jesus' salvific, divine function: "I am the bread of life" (6:51); "I am the light of the world" (8:12); cf. MOLONEY, "Johannine Theology", 1423-24.

above, most commentators believe that the Tao of the *Lao-tzu* is not personal and has no intentional design for the universe or humanity⁸⁹. The sage perceives the ways of Tao by observing the ways of heaven and earth. The relationship between the sage and Tao is quite different from that loving union between Jesus and the Father. One cannot speak of an interpersonal relationship or loving dialogue between the sage and Tao. Nevertheless, Lao Tzu describes an ideal sage as one who has obtained Tao, guards Tao, and becomes perfectly one with Tao through an attentive response to its ways. Thus a Taoist sage enjoys a profound unitive experience with Tao that should be characterized as belonging to the domain of the mystical⁹⁰.

The personal model and the unitive model, which is based on the experience of nonduality, are two complementary models for describing our relationship with God or the Absolute. Even with Jesus and the disciples one finds the two models working together. For the Johannine Jesus, the I-Thou relationship is the predominant model for his union with God, who is his Father and the one who sent him. The personal model is also the obvious one for the disciples' relationship with Jesus and with the Father. In addition to personal appellations, however, such as *Father, Lord, Savior, Master, Shepherd*, etc., John also employs non-personal imagery for God and Jesus and the Spirit, such as *life, light, breath, water, bread, and vine*. These images involve a participatory relationship of the disciples with Jesus and with God, which resembles a unitive or nondual relationship⁹¹. Hence, both in Jesus' relationship with God, and in that of the disciples with Jesus and with God, we find a unitive model working side by side with the personal model. Far from being mutually

⁸⁹ I would prefer to say that Tao is *trans*-personal; see above.

⁹⁰ I find Harvey Egan's concise description of mysticism to the point: mysticism is "the universal thrust of the human spirit for experiential union with the Absolute and the theory of that union"; cf. HARVEY EGAN, *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?*, Paulist Press, NY 1982, 3. For a discussion on the mysticism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu see LIVIA KOHN, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*, Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ 1992, 4-9.

⁹¹ The disciples' nondual relationship is modeled on that of Jesus with the Father, which is one of "unity in distinction": "The Father and I are one... the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:30,38). However, Jesus never said: "I am the Father".

exclusive, the two models are complementary to each other⁹². Co-existing with the personal model, the unitive model often points towards a silent contemplation of God as the incomprehensible *mystery*, or towards a profound mystical experience of the ineffable Tao as *wu*.

Summary and Conclusion

In order to reflect on the Johannine Jesus – the Logos incarnate – from the perspective of a Taoist sage – the embodiment of Tao, it has been necessary to study and compare the ideas of the Logos and Tao. Although deriving from very different religious and philosophical backgrounds, the two concepts bear striking similarities. The Logos of John's Prologue is the principle of self-revelation of the hidden God through creation and the incarnation. Likewise, Lao Tzu is concerned with the problem of the manifestation of the hidden Tao. The Tao of Lao Tzu, however, contains the twofold aspect of *wu* and *yu*, hiddenness and manifestation. Whereas Tao as *wu* can be likened to the hidden God, Tao as *yu* resembles the Logos. Hence, the concept of Tao is broader than that of the Logos.

Just as there are similarities between Tao as *yu* and the Logos, one also finds some of the characteristics of a Taoist sage manifested on the face of Jesus. At the heart of the Johannine Jesus is the profound sense of his own origin and destiny, that is, his coming from and returning to the Father. This reflects the return movement of all things to Tao as their source and root. Through his total dependence on the Father, Jesus offers a perfect example of non-action, the hallmark of a Taoist sage. Likewise, Jesus' glorification by being lifted up on the cross is a most eloquent illustration of how a sage's weakness overcomes the powerful. Moreover, the sage's unitive experience of being at one with Tao resonates with Jesus' experience of being one with the Father and living the very life of the Father.

However, there are two major differences between Jesus and a Taoist sage. Firstly, even though Lao Tzu's description of the sage reveals some

⁹² For the complementary character of personal model and unitive model in theology and spirituality see CHANG CH'UN-SHEN, *Chung-kuo ling-hsiu ch'u-i* (An Outline of Chinese Spirituality), Kuang-ch'i, Taichung 1978, 142-161.

personal traits of the author himself, the sage presented by him is an ideal character that transcends time and space. While a Taoist sage serves as model for others, according to Lao Tzu it is not necessary to establish a relationship with the sage in order to attain union with Tao. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is a concrete historical personage. He is the way leading to the Father. Jesus' union with the Father is treated as both model and source for the disciples' union with God.

Secondly, Jesus perceived and responded to God's salvific design for the world by observing God's saving deeds in history. Thus Jesus constantly maintained a loving, personal relationship with the Father. The sage, however, responds to Tao by observing the movements of heaven and earth. Thus, in place of an interpersonal dialogue, the sage's relationship with Tao follows a unitive model. Nevertheless, employed as a complement to the personal model, the unitive model favors an apophatic approach to the ineffable mystery of God or Tao through silent contemplation. The *Tao-te ching* actually opens with the lapidary statement: "The Tao that can be told of is not the constant Tao".

In order to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to their contemporary world, the early Greek Fathers succeeded in blending the Christian message with Greek culture. With its strength and weaknesses, the Hellenization of the Christian message was a necessary process of inculturation. The Fathers' effort has served Christianity for the first two millennia of its history, making a profound impact on Western cultures as a whole. With the arrival of the new millennium, one may wonder if this is not an opportune time for a deeper understanding of the dynamic Christian message through contact with the wisdom of various ancient traditions of the East. Moreover, inculturation is necessary so that the Christian message may become deeply rooted in a particular region. It is indispensable to portray the Asian faces of Jesus if we wish him to be warmly received by Asian peoples. In this paper I have attempted to depict some Taoist features on the face of the Johannine Jesus. Beneath these common traits one can perceive the great resonance of a common center: the unitive experience of human participation in the divine mystery of God or Tao. Finally, it is important that, while expressing due respect for native cultures, our portrait should faithfully reflect the Jesus of the gospels.