

## **Religion**

Being a Taoist doesn't tie a person down to a religion. It's very possible to be a Christian and a Taoist, or indeed to mix any religion with Taoism.

What is a religion? I define religion as:

A system of belief, attitudes and practices set towards the service and worship of a God or the supernatural.

The Tao is not God, and the Tao is not supernatural. As such Taoism is not a religion; it's simply living to your nature with harmony relative to the Tao.

To confuse the issue people have taken Taoism and have converted it to a religion. So while Taoism is not a religion, a religion called Taoism does exist. On one level, these Taoist religions are simply a set of practices that help a person achieve balance within life. The "religious" forms of Taoism take a slightly Buddhist approach in elevating to a "deity" level wise immortal Taoist elders, each acting as guides in understanding the Tao. These Taoist religions are heavily influenced by the works of earlier Taoist sages.

Typically westerners separate Taoism as a "philosophy" and as Taoism a "religion". This style of separation has been very misleading, as this limits the way westerners think of Taoism. Labeling leads to missing a whole range of subtleties within Taoism by starting with narrowed, predefined concepts of a Taoist practice.

To further complicate everything Taoism has influenced and changed religions such as Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. At times it can be confusing to understand the distinctions between some Buddhist teachings and Taoism itself.

So what would Taoism say about religion in general?

Taoism doesn't say anything about religion.

My personal view is that all religions are true to the faith which fosters the belief. God, or all gods, are true and are of the Tao, when a person's belief is true to his or her faith. This flows into a concept that all Gods / God are of a personal nature, even when being shared through an organized religion. No single religion represents the entirety of humanity, as humanity itself is a spectrum of faith. This overall spectrum blends together to create a representation of humanity which is then within and at one with the Tao.

As a result, Taoists aren't necessarily religious, but typically blend aspects of their religious upbringings and cultures with their personal practices.

Taoism is **more** than just a “philosophy” or a “religion”. A Personal Tao shouldn’t be confused with the concept of a personal god. A Personal Tao rises out of all the different concepts of Taoism and should be understood as being:

A system of belief, attitudes and practices set towards the service and living to a person’s own nature.

===== The Question of God =====

For many, the issues of Religion and God are co-mingled to the point of being simmered down to the question: Does God exist? Many phrase this as a black or white question with definite answers: God either does or doesn’t exist. If you are an atheist, then God doesn’t exist; if you practice a religion, then God exists relative to your belief structure.

Taoism offers the third path: Skip the question! The question of God’s existence is **irrelevant**. God could or could not exist, and either state doesn’t change the way we lead our lives. Our lives are expressions of action between ourselves and the universe. To respect our surrounding environment is a furthering of respect to ourselves. This manner of living doesn’t change regardless of the nature of God.

This doesn’t make a Taoist Godless; rather a Taoist considers God a wonderful question to meditate against (***much like sharpening a knife against a rock***) but to put to the side when dealing with daily concerns. This is where the Personal Tao steps into the equation. If a person has faith in a higher being (***if they know the expression of their life matters relative to this belief***) then it’s acceptable to live to those beliefs. The point where belief becomes unacceptable is upon forcing faith unto someone else or even oneself. Forcing a view typically comes out of an unsurity of faith. Forcing belief is the attempt to keep faith thru a process of action and subjugation. Such actions flow against finding a true Personal Tao.



## ===== Paths =====

You cannot be handed the Tao-Te Ching and magically discover a doctrine of belief. This offers a real problem for a Taoist, as each Taoist must find a personal path and acceptance of inner faith. While Taoist texts will offer hints for living wisely, they will not open up the universe's door with a set of SUV keys to 4-wheel-drive thru bramble patches. Instead these books speak in metaphors: "*Flow as a river undercutting around the bramble bush and have a nice day.*" Taoist texts will often elaborate telling you: "*When falling off a cliff directly into the brambles, consider how amazing and flexible the brambles are in their nature, helping in part to break your fall, then with calmness, let gravity tumble you clear of the brambles*". At this point most readers stop and wonder what the hell they just read. Some people actually prefer to be told or taught directly how to live, which many organized religions happily try to do. This means many religious texts will just say "*Thou shalt not jump in the bramble bush*". Taoism instead encourages a person to just be themselves and explore the brambles.

The problem I have with many religions is being told directly what faith should be, which ends up as someone else's version of faith. This, in turn, means people are left to break tenets of their religious background or belief system, in order to be themselves. This creates an internal battle between their nature and an imposed outside vision. Everyone has some variation in their being; it's part of our humanity. Taoism has the advantage of always being practiced to your own faith, as you actively pursue what feels right instead of what has been labeled as right. Nothing is more natural than being a Taoist. It's being true to the self. The bigger problem is discovering your nature and what inner faith holds true for you.

My upbringing was Taoist, yet my parents didn't practice Taoism. My father was an atheist, my mother an animist, and my friends were various Christian denominations. Strangely, my parents and other adults never tried too hard to impose any of their own nature onto my soul. Instead, I was left alone to wander to the whims of my nature. Some days I would just meander along a river all day, some days I would just talk to different people listening to their life stories, some days I would play with the trees, and other days I would explore and mix into the streets of New York City. Since I didn't cause too many problems, I was returned the courtesy of unhampered freedom. In this wandering, I discovered myself and later realized it was also called Taoism. The path was surprisingly simple. When coming across something that made sense, I tried it. Over time I discarded items which didn't feel right, discovering the wisdom of newer truths, all the while always permitting myself to just be myself.

I discovered that truth is ever shifting, based mainly upon perception; living recommends a path of shifting along. Truth breaks when a person doesn't flow with the reality of the world. At this point it should be mentioned that we have inner truth and outer truths. Overall truth is the balance between these inner and outer truths. In searching for truth, at some point a person will encounter religion. No matter how much one searches the outside world, at some point, inner personal questions surface which cannot be resolved by simple observation or interaction with the outer world. Religion is one of many tools which can be used to help find answers to difficult questions.

If you are secure and know yourself truly, and know your faith is true, then skip the rest of this section. Your path is true, and that is wonderful and indeed you are finding your own Personal Tao.

If you are wondering and have doubts: seemingly can't find answers that make sense with religions you encounter. Many other people have the same problem. I watch people who try so hard to find a religion that fits them. Looking, trying on churches like clothes, reading different spiritual texts, trying out recommendations of others... looking some more, and then some more and more and more: All the searching becomes "evermores"... Each act of reaching out is like a fly, flies buzzing around, which end up being distractions that we swat away. The buzz isn't about finding a religion; it's a search to establish a firm acceptance of ourselves and the larger universe. The goal is a "surety of self" within the tumbling tide of life.

Religions come with a pre-packaged set of practices to help guide one into that surety of self. Of course seemingly countless religious packages exist. Typically, people make due with something which feels close to the mark or with the religion that was handed to them at the start of their lives. Living like this, just making due, can leave one with constant doubt, anxiety and feeling lost.

Finding self doesn't have to be a process of discovering religion (or scientific facts). Religions (and Science) are both a path for discovering how a person fits in with the world. So to those having problems trying to find something which feels right, the solution is simple: Flip the spiritual quest around and instead spend some time with yourself. Begin writing a journal, which in turn will become a set of personal scriptures to help discover how to be yourself. A person needs only to accept themselves, to find their place within the larger world. It's accepting the bad -the absolution- which is often the greatest gift of a religion. This absolution is the gift of acceptance. A beautiful event within religion is when a clergy member takes the time to truly accept you first; this makes it easier in turn to accept yourself later. It's a spiritual trick to aid someone to learn how to accept themselves. So the spiritual practice of any religion can be understood as accepting yourself for your own nature, which becomes wondrous upon the acceptance. Religions teach this from the outside while Taoism teaches this from our inner selves. Both paths are options; it's just a question of how to reach the goal.