

**The Image of Jesus Christ in a Chinese  
Inclusivist Context: I- kuan Tao's Christology  
and Its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue**

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## Abstract

In the early twentieth century the traditional Chinese attitude of regarding the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) as one (*san-chiao he-i* 三教合一), i.e., as expressions of a single Tao, began to be extended to other major religions. Most commonly Christianity and Islam were added on to the Three Teachings, creating a claim for the unity of the “Five Teachings” (*wu-chiao he-i* 五教合一). This new formula was eagerly adopted by a number of new religious movements of the early Republican period. In this paper, I will examine the role and image of Jesus in one of these religious movements: the “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (I-Kuan-Tao 一貫道).

During the early Republic, influential Christian missionaries expressed the hope that the Five Religions syncretism of sects such as the Tao-Yuan may provide a foothold for evangelization among their membership. Their integration of Christianity might serve as a *preparatio evangelica*, opening their minds to the Christian gospel. The findings of the present study cast doubt on such expectations, but may well help us define other ways of inter-religious dialogue. What we are finding is not an acceptance of the Jesus Christ propagated by Christian missionaries, but his appropriation on the terms of the religious system in question. In the I-Kuan-Tao, Jesus is divested of all characteristics central to a Christian understanding of his person, nature, and meaning. Instead of being the Christ, he becomes a sage in the service of a higher Tao, an emissary of the Venerable Mother sent to fulfill a limited role in a grander scheme of salvation. Jesus' appearance in I-Kuan-Tao spirit-writing séances ultimately serves to affirm the global validity of the movement's worldview. Jesus is reinterpreted to fit harmoniously into a religious system that owes next to nothing to the Christian gospel.

Any attempt at inter-religious dialogue based on shared symbols such as Jesus needs to take this diversity of appropriation and interpretation into account. The final section of this paper contains an exploration of the terms and conditions between the I-Kuan-Tao's inclusivist approach to other religions and its equally Christian counterpart.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century the traditional Chinese attitude of regarding the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) as one (san-chiao he-i 三教合一), i.e., as expressions of a single Tao, began to be extended to other major religions. Most commonly Christianity and Islam were added on to the Three Teachings, creating a claim for the unity of the “Five Teachings” (wu-chiao he-i 五教合一). This new formula was eagerly adopted by a number of new religious movements of the early Republican period, which is why Richard Fox Young in a seminal article calls them “unity sects”. In this article, Young studied the place of Christianity in one such unity sect, the Tao-Yüan 道院 (“Sanctuary of the Tao”), a movement founded in 1921 in Shantung province.<sup>1</sup> The present article will focus on a near-contemporaneous religious movement, the “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (I-Kuan Tao 一貫道), another unity sect originating from early Republican Shantung province. I will first present the ways in which the figure of Jesus Christ is approached in I-Kuan Tao texts, before concluding with an assessment of this approach in terms of its implications for a religious dialogue between I-Kuan Tao and Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Young 1989.

2 This essay is based on an earlier version titled “Jesus in Chinese Popular Sects,” which will appear in vol. 3b of *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, ed. Roman Malek (St. Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica; Nettetal:Verlag, forthcoming). The earlier version includes additional material and comparative look at the Tao-yüan, but lacks the present essay’s consideration implications for interreligious dialogue.

## 2. JESUS IN THE I-KUAN TAO

### a. Jesus in the Early History of the Sect

The “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (I-Kuan Tao) was founded in 1930 in Chi-nan in the province of Shantung. Despite this relatively recent date, this movement is deeply rooted in an ancient Chinese tradition of popular sectarianism. It came into being as an early twentieth century offshoot of the so-called Way of Former Heaven tradition (Hsien-t’ien Tao 先天道), and its founder Chang T’ien-jan 張天然 (1889-1947) was regarded as the eighteenth (and final one) in a long succession of sectarian patriarchs.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that this new/old movement at first stuck to the more traditional “unity of the Three Teachings” formula, as can be seen in its earliest catechism, the *I-Kuan Tao i-wen chieh-ta* 《一貫道疑問解答》 (“Explanations and Answers to Questions Concerning the Way of All-Pervading Unity”).<sup>4</sup> However, while the Three Teachings formula clearly predominates in early I-Kuan Tao sources, this does not mean that Christianity and Islam are deliberately excluded. In the first detailed scholarly study of the I-Kuan Tao, Li Shih-yü stresses the central role of the unity of the three teachings, but also mentions a few instances of a broader view of suprarreligious unity.<sup>5</sup> Most significant among these intimations of a Five Teachings view are two texts listed by Li in his overview of I-Kuan Tao literature, the *Wu-chiao chen-ti* 《五教真諦》 (“Truth of the Five Teachings”) and the *Hui Yeh chiao-chu sheng-hsün* 《回、耶教主聖訓》 (“Sagely Instructions by the Masters of Islam and Christianity”). Both are slim volumes (twenty and five pages respectively) of

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3 Good overviews of the I-Kuan Tao’s history and teachings can be found in Jordan & Overmyer 1986, Ma & Han 1992, Shinohara 1993, and Soo 1997.

4 See entries number 58 & 59 (*I-Kuan Tao i-wen chieh-ta*, pp.43-47). On this text see Jordan & Overmyer 1986: 251-252.

5 Li 1948: 58-59.

spirit-written revelations.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, I did not have access to these texts, but Li Shih-yü's description of them gives us some clues as to their nature. The *Wu-chiao chen-ti* contained seven spirit-written essays, preceded by a preface by the Living Buddha Chi-kung. One of these was penned by Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Li provides more detailed information on the *Hui Yeh chiao-chu sheng-hsün* and I would like to present it here as the most specific piece of evidence of the role and understanding of Jesus in the early I-Kuan Tao. According to Li's bibliographic entry this brief, five-page booklet was published by the Ch'ung-hua T'ang 崇華堂 in T'ien-chin 天津 in 1941.<sup>8</sup> It contains three spirit-written messages: one from Mohammed given in response to a request by a recently converted Muslim I-Kuan Tao member (dated 24 February 1939), a message from Jesus on the occasion of his birthday (dated 25 December 1938), and another message from Jesus given on 10 April 1941 in Hsü-chou 徐州.

While I did not have access to the original *Hui Yeh chiao-chu sheng-hsün*, the Jesus message delivered on Christmas Day of 1938 is fortunately reprinted in a recent collection of I-Kuan Tao sources. As a record of probably the earliest appearance of Jesus Christ in an I-Kuan Tao séance, this text affords us a first view of the image of Jesus in this new religious movement. Below I translate part of this revelation:

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6 Spirit-writing is the religious practice of having a human medium "channel" the words of the gods while he or she writes out texts. This is usually done by means of a wooden stick (similar to the planchette of Western spiritualism) on a sand-covered surface. The actual authors of the text are deemed to be the channelled deities, and I indicate them as such in this essay.

7 Li 1948: 113.

8 Li 1948: 118.

[...] At this time, the ten thousand ways all return to the Way of Heaven. I, too, have left Heaven above to assist in [the propagation of] the Tao. I see the last day of the world about to arrive, yet my followers' minds are even more darkened than before. Being born and dying, where are they to return to? In the end, what good is it if I forgive sins on your behalf? In vain have I left you the cross, my followers disregard it. Because I do not want to see all of you going to perdition, I am now having the bamboo pen write words of truth. Your sins are truly numerous, and it will be very difficult to rely just on me for your salvation. If your conduct is not in accord with principles, Heaven will not speak of "forgiving sins". You should quickly come to a thorough realization [of this]. Turn back -- the road is even and easy. For those lambs that have already lost their way, I have come to guide them onwards. Clearly recognize the timing of Heaven, do not remain attached to ideas of "Hell" and "Heaven". On this joyous occasion of my birthday, do you understand my Tao? Does your natural goodness open up and manifest itself? If you become lost in chanting mere words, you truly fail to carry out your duty of saving the world. If at the fork of the road you hesitate to go forward, you will become a homeless outcast without refuge. You are caught up in a great dream and are slow to awaken. Just to rely on me truly is not possible. If you seek Heaven's help with utmost sincerity, you will encounter more spiritual responsiveness than you expected. You must no longer tarry in confusion,



**but change with time and opportunity. Stubbornly holding on to the old principles will just lead you to perdition!**

**The world is vast, its crooked roads are many.**

**One must have a karmic predisposition to understand a timely opportunity.**

**The great harmony of all nations will come about soon.**

**Without seeking the Great Tao it is difficult to return to Heaven.**

**The founders of all the religions**

**Together are returning to the true transmission [of the Tao].**

**How more should you useless sons of confusion**

**Turn back and climb the farther shore. [...]<sup>9</sup>**

The key theme of this text is the insufficiency of the Christian gospel for the attainment of final salvation. Reliance on Jesus Christ as one's saviour does not guarantee forgiveness of sins, return to Heaven, and salvation from final annihilation. This can only be found by turning to the Great Tao, which is now made available by the I-Kuan Tao. The founders of all religions are availing themselves of this "timely opportunity" by returning to the one Tao, as should all Christians who at present are still caught up in the limitations of their faith. Note the frequent recurrence of the terms "returning" or "turning back": acceptance of the Tao is seen as the realization of one's own true nature, as a return to the divine home that humanity had lost due to its growing attachment to the world of dust. The Christian faith is one such attachment that needs to be abandoned for the higher truth of the Great Tao, only then can one "return to Heaven" (*fan-t'ien* 返天).

<sup>9</sup> Fu 1999: 582.

The theme of Christian insufficiency is taken up again in another, shorter message from Jesus promulgated in 1940, in which he says that

**.... my teachings are all part of the Way of Heaven. No one should say that by just believing in and reciting and holding on to this Christian tradition one can attain the ultimate realization. If at this critical juncture you are not willing to turn back, when will you ever return to the garden of your [true] home?<sup>10</sup>**

The Christian promise of redemption is declared invalid and its seeker is directed to the only source of true salvation available in this final age -- the Way bestowed by the I-Kuan Tao. Between these two messages of 1938 and 1940 one can perceive a growing sense of urgency, which reaches a climax in another Jesus revelation received in 1941. This message was delivered at the request of Chang T'ien-jan's wife who asked Jesus to send down instructions for Christians. Li Shih-yü provides an excerpt from the 1941 revelation, which I translate here:

**Jehova is love, he is the light of life; [by comparison] Socrates is only an obscure ray of cultural light lasting for a moment. Save, oh, save my beloved flock! Lord, my face is covered in hot tears! I, Jesus Christ, have received God's command to come and to give my Christian people a last instruction: you do not need to worship me. [Instead] the Saviour Yüeh-hui is your light in the black darkness, the road sign for those who have lost their way, the sign which allows you to see clearly the direction of**

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10 Fu 1999: 613.

the future. The blood and tears of a thousand years have never dried -- just feel this heart of mine. Has the last day come? Do you want to see me again? What day is it now? Red water rushes like a river through Germany and the Mediterranean, its waves reaching the oceans of the east, the west, the south, and the north. Yet the great war with its enormous bloodshed does not awaken the drunkards in the inns. I weep -- if I could not weep, who could know what is in my heart? What is truth? What is the correct way? My Christians, give me an answer! In the churches the bells call to prayer, but although you may be able to recite by heart the Old and the New Testament, what is it that is written on both of them? Where is the true way, who has seen it? Is it Confucianism? Is it Buddhism? Is it Taoism? Or is it the imported [teachings of] Jesus and Mohammed? Think again, my disciples ... , take your unquestioned beliefs and examine them again with a clear head, sharp eyes, and a sincere mind. Do you realize something? ....<sup>11</sup>

Here, the I-Kuan Tao Jesus cries out and weeps in anguish over the suffering of the world. This suffering is not, however, rooted in the inherent sinfulness of humanity, but in its ignorance -- its ignorance specifically of the true Way. It is the I-Kuan Tao's mission in the unfolding cosmic drama leading up to the imminent end of the world to save humans from annihilation by removing this ignorance. This is done by means of a secret initiation ritual through which the postulant comes to "obtain the Tao" (*te-tao* 得道). This knowledge of the true Tao will provide the answers to the series of harrying questions Jesus poses in his message.

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11 Li 1948: 118.

As the transmission of the true and complete Way is the exclusive prerogative of the I-Kuan Tao, it makes sense from its point of view for Jesus to call on his followers to give worship to the "saviour Yüeh-hui" (Yüeh-hui *chiu-chu* 月慧救主) rather than to himself, for only she can dispense salvation in this final age.<sup>12</sup> Yüeh-hui is none other than the wife of Chang T'ien-jan, Sun Su-chen 孫素真, who was regarded as an avatar of a bodhisattva named Yüeh-hui.<sup>13</sup> The reader may remember that it was she who requested this particular revelation from Jesus.

Jesus' urgent and anguished tone is in keeping with the immediacy of millenarian expectation that dominated the early I-Kuan Tao, which developed in a period that indeed seemed to portend imminent doom. By the time of the 1941 Jesus revelation the Second World War had been raging in Europe for one and a half years, and the Sino-Japanese War was already in its fourth year. Things certainly looked bleak and seemed to justify apocalyptic expectations. It was high time for everyone to be awakened from the partial truths of their respective religions and return to the full and true Tao bestowed by the Way of All-Pervading Unity. Jesus is heard here making this call for the benefit of his Christian constituency so as to comply with the I-Kuan Tao's call to unify the religions and make them return to their original source, the Tao.<sup>14</sup>

In the I-Kuan Tao, the present and highly urgent work of transmitting the Tao has been entrusted by the Venerable Mother of the Ultimateless 無極老母 to a number of deities whose prominence is visible in the arrangements of I-Kuan Tao shrines. The deities typically represented on I-Kuan Tao altars are (in order of precedence):

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12 Note the use of the term *chiu-chu*, which is a neologism created originally by missionaries to translate the Christian notion of "saviour".

13 Jordan & Overmyer 1986: 218.

14 *I-Kuan Tao i-wen chieh-ta*, p.44.

the Venerable Mother, the Buddha Maitreya, Kuan-yin, the Living Buddha Chi-kung, Kuan Kung, and Lü Tsu. Pictures of Chang T'ien-jan and his wife are hung on the wall to both sides of the altar. While the masters of the Five Religions are briefly honoured in I-Kuan Tao liturgy,<sup>15</sup> the fact that they are not usually represented on the altar points to their basically passive role as sages of the past whose principal duty in the present is to refer their followers to the only source of the true Tao available in these last days of the world.<sup>16</sup> The low liturgical profile of Jesus (and the other "founders of the religions") in the I-Kuan Tao continues to the present day, and the doctrinal position of Jesus has also remained essentially the same: he is regarded as the founder of a limited religious tradition that is being superseded by the true Tao now made available to all those with the right karmic affinity for its reception. While the general outline has not changed, the I-Kuan Tao's image of Jesus has received some further elaboration. In the following section I will try to trace some of these further elaborations on the basis of a selection of more recent sources.

### **b. Post-War Developments**

Li Shih-yü sees the time after 1945 as a period of rapid decline in the I-Kuan Tao's fortunes.<sup>17</sup> It came under suspicion of collaboration with the Japanese occupation forces and was regarded with disfavour by both the Nationalists and the Communists during

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15 Jordan & Overmyer 1986: 294.

16 The I-Kuan Tao sanctuary described in Jordan & Overmyer 1986 (pp. 227-228) is therefore rather unusual in giving a prominent position to Lao-tzu, Confucius, and Shakyamuni Buddha on its altar. One might speculate that this deviation from standard arrangements may have served to make the shrine less obviously I-Kuan Tao in affiliation -- which would have been a wise precaution at a time when the movement was still banned in Taiwan.

17 Li 1948: 32.

the years of civil war. It received a further blow when in 1947 its founder Chang T'ien-jan died. Subsequently the movement split up into separate organizational entities (branches) that conducted their affairs without reference to a universally recognized central leadership. Thus, any statements made about I-Kuan Tao beliefs on the basis of texts published after 1947 apply first and foremost to the particular subgroup that produced them, and cannot automatically be taken to represent the I-Kuan Tao as a whole. On the other hand, doctrinal variation among the branches is not very significant, so that at least in its general outlines the following analysis of a number of I-Kuan Tao texts provides an image of Jesus that will be recognized and accepted by all subgroups of the movement.

A little more than a year after Chang T'ien-jan's death a new catechism was produced, apparently to reinforce the follower's faith in the chaotic and bloody final months of the Chinese civil war. This work, entitled *Chen-li Chiang-i* 《真理講義》 (“Lectures on the Truth”), was the result of eight spirit-writing séances held between 26 November and 13 December 1948 at an undisclosed location. During these sessions a deity called Yüan-chang Ta-jen 院長大人 dealt with key issues of doctrine in the same question-and-answer format already employed in the catechism *I-Kuan Tao i-wen chieh-ta*.<sup>18</sup> One immediately noticeable change is of the Five Teachings unity formula, together with a more developed rationale for their apparent differences:

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18 According to information in the book, the deity Yüan-chang Ta-jen is head of the Examinations Office (考試院長) in Heaven, with the formal title of “Chief Examiner of the Three Heavens” (San-t'ien chu-k'ao 三天主考). He stands in a special relationship to Chang T'ien-jan, who was his father in a previous life. See *T'ien-tao chen-li Chiang-i ch'ien-chu*, p.21-30, for more information on this deity unique to the I-Kuan Tao.

**XVI.**

**[Question:] Are the five religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam the same? Why do their teachings differ?**

**[Answer:] A poem:**

**The Five Religions are originally one family.**

**Their teachings were established according to the requirements of specific regions and people.**

**Although their forms are different, their principle is one.**

**[It is only] confused people who recklessly make distinctions between them.**

**Heaven is concerned for the life of the people and will always teach them by means of the Tao. Only then can people find peace and contentment. Without being taught, even an old man is like a child, without knowledge and of abominable conduct. Therefore the sages and Buddhas regard those under Heaven who are not sages and Buddhas as children, and cherish and love them.**

**For the thousands of years from ancient to present times, it was the teachings of the sages and Buddhas and the government by a ruler that made society and human life possible. Without people would not submit to the government.**

**Therefore Heaven commanded the Sages of the Five Religions to descend into the world one after the other, each in a different area, and to establish their teachings according to the requirements of**

their specific regions and people. Confucius of Confucianism, the Tathagata of Buddhism, Lao-tzu of Taoism, and Mohammed of Islam all descended to be born in the East, while Jesus of Christianity descended to be born in the West. Ever since then they have each established their doctrines and rules, taking it upon themselves to transform the people. Therefore the teachings bequeathed by the sages are still present in our day.

Even though the Five Religions have all received the command of Heaven to transmit the Way, their methods were not the same, but were adapted to the conditions of their regions and the customs of the people. But although their names were different, their principle was the same:

Confucianism established its teaching in the formula “preserving the mind and nourishing one’s nature, holding fast to the mean and uniting in a single thread”, transforming humans by calling for “loyalty and forgiveness”.

Buddhism established its teaching in the formula “illuminating the mind and manifesting one’s nature, making all dharmas return to the One”, transforming humans by calling for “compassion”.

Taoism established its teaching in the formula “cultivating the mind and refining one’s nature, embracing the primordial and guarding the One”,



transforming humans by calling for “loyalty and forgiveness”.

Jesus of Christianity established his teaching in the formula “cleansing the mind and shifting one’s nature, praying quietly and being close to the One”, transforming humans by calling for “love without distinction”.

Islam established its teaching in the formula “strengthening the mind and consolidating one’s nature, in clear truth returning to the One”, transforming humans by calling for “humanity and love”.

Although the words of the Five Religions are not the same, how could their principles ever have been different?

When the sages of the Five Religions had received the command to transmit the Tao, it was only for the purpose of establishing teachings and transforming the people. By the time they had completed their mission, their “mind dharma” had not yet been widely propagated. Thus, the “mind dharma” of Confucianism was transmitted to Mencius, but was lost afterwards. In the case of Taoism, the “wind of the Tao” was disrupted after it had been transmitted to Yin Hsi 尹喜. When Jesus had finished establishing his teaching, he originally intended to propagate the “mind-dharma” widely, but as the time had not yet come, the secrets of Heaven could not be

divulged. Therefore he was nailed to the “cross” and returned to Heaven. After Mohammed had established his teaching, its heavenly mandate was immediately revoked. Only the Buddhist teachings were transmitted all through the age of Red Yang 紅陽 until the present day. However, later followers of the Five Religions, because they had not yet received the “true transmission”, compiled the sages’ scriptures and piously recited them, believing that they had obtained the truth. This is too pitiable!

By now the Five Religions have all already lost their truth! With the advent of the age of White Yang 白陽 the time for the wide propagation of the “correct dharma” 正法 has come. I hope that the believers will soon awaken and seek the truth. Truly this is a great blessing such as comes only once in three lifetimes.<sup>19</sup>

To my knowledge, this is the earliest I-Kuan Tao text to develop a coherent formula for the integration of the Five Religions into the One Tao. What we can learn from this text for the I-Kuan Tao’s understanding of Jesus is that he was one of the sages sent by Heaven in the previous world period, the age of Red Yang, to establish a religion to suit the needs of a particular people in a particular geographical area, but that he did not have the mandate to spread the full and true Tao, as the time for this had not yet come. Interestingly, the text holds that Jesus intended to transmit this

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19 *T'ien-tao chen-li Chiang-i ch'ien-chu*, pp.367-381. The Five Teachings formula has been incorporated into a revised version of the *I-Kuan Tao i-wen chieh-ta* catechism under the title *Hsing-li t'i-shih chü-chieh* 《性理題釋句解》 which in various editions currently enjoys wide circulation in I-Kuan Tao circles.

“mind dharma” even without this mandate. As a result he died on the cross lest the secrets of Heaven be divulged in an untimely manner. With the advent of the current age of White Yang, the transmission of the true Tao will supersede the by now corrupted teachings of the Five Religions.

The author of this text touches on a key area of doctrine, Jesus' death on the cross, and gives it a rather curious reading as divine punishment, rather than the act of redemption it represents in the Christian understanding. This reading of the meaning of the cross is a first venture into a specifically I-Kuan Tao approach to Bible exegesis whose most elaborate product so far is a slim, 73-page volume entitled *Sheng-ching yü T'ien-tao* 《聖經與天道》 (“The Bible and the Way of Heaven”), written by an anonymous author in 1984 (date of the preface). Composed in the age of Red Yang, the Bible of course cannot contain the full transmission of the Tao, something that has only become possible in the present age of White Yang, but it does contain numerous hints at this Tao and its harbingers. It is these hints that an esoteric exegesis seeks to elicit from the text. Here the cross is not read as a divine intervention to forestall the premature transmission of the Tao, but as a hidden reference to the location of the Tao, the so-called “mysterious pass” (*hsüan-kuan* 玄關) that is pointed out in the secret I-Kuan Tao initiation ritual. Since it is forbidden for an initiate to describe the exact location of this “pass” on the human body, the exegete points out that the two criminals crucified to both sides of Jesus represent the eyes in their Buddhist understanding as one of the “six robbers” (*liu-tsei* 六賊, the six sense organs). If the criminals are the eyes, then the position of Jesus' cross in the middle between them can be taken as hinting at the location of the mysterious pass.<sup>20</sup> Other indirect references to the *hsüan-kuan* are discovered in Jesus' judgment that “anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me

20 *Sheng-ching yü T'ien-tao*, p.28.

is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10.38),<sup>21</sup> and in his reply to the Pharisees that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.21).<sup>22</sup> The latter passage is rendered in Chinese translation as *shen tê kuo chiu tsai ni-men chung-chien* 神的國就在你們中間. The I-Kuan Tao exegete takes *ni-men chung-chien* here in its literal meaning as "in your middle, in your centre", which yields another reference to the bodily location of the mysterious pass.<sup>23</sup>

Besides hidden references to the "three treasures" conferred in the I-Kuan Tao initiation ceremony, most significant in this reading of the Bible is its approach to the central theme of Jesus as the Messiah. Here we encounter a complete reevaluation of Jesus. In fact, Jesus is not the Messiah announced by John the Baptist, as an esoteric reading of the Gospel of Matthew shows. In Matthew 3.11-12 John says:

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21 *Sheng-ching yü T'ien-tao*, p.27.

22 *Sheng-ching yü T'ien-tao*, p.26.

23 On a side note, this "esoteric exegesis" reminds me somewhat of ancient Gnostic approaches to the canonical gospels. "Gnostic theologians claim that those apparently simple gospel narratives are actually allegories—which, read 'spiritually,' disclose in symbolic language the process of inner redemption. [...] Since truth consists in a potentially universal process of coming to 'know' the spiritual meaning of existence, they [the Naassenes, a Gnostic group] claim that only those who have been initiated and have 'become truly gnostics' are able to perceive the 'great and ineffable mystery' ... underlying the words of a sacred text. The literal level of any text, then, including that of the gospels, offers only the outward manifestation of inner meaning; it contains the metaphorical form of the ineffable truth" (Pagels 1973: 14, 15-16). An example of such Gnostic exegesis is the interpretation of Jesus ascending to and descending from elevated places as symbolizing the spirit's movement between the hylic and the psychic regions (Pagels 1973: 67). I would like to thank Nate DesRosiers for bringing Pagels' study to my attention.

**I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**

In some Chinese translations the “winnowing fork” is rendered as *po-chi* 簸箕, a “winnowing fan”. The I-Kuan Tao exegete interprets this as a reference to the Living Buddha Chi-kung, who is always depicted holding a ragged fan. The I-Kuan Tao’s founder Chang T’ien-jan was regarded as an avatar of Chi-kung. Chi-kung in turn prepares the coming of the true Messiah of the age of White Yang, the Buddha Maitreya. This identification is hinted at in the spelling of the Chinese words for “Messiah” (Mi-sai-ya 彌賽亞) and “Maitreya” (Mi-le 彌勒), both of which start with the same character.<sup>24</sup>

What we find here is a more detailed application of what we can by now recognize as the I-Kuan Tao’s approach to Jesus: to regard him as a sage of the age of Red Yang who had received a heavenly mandate to establish a religion. A religion is not the Tao, but it may serve a positive purpose by transforming people and preparing them for the final dispensation of the true Tao in the subsequent age of White Yang. Thus, Jesus’ teachings were appropriate for their place and age, but are now being superseded by the transmission of the Tao made available in the present final days of the world. As preparation for the coming of the true saviour, Jesus’ teachings (and the Bible more generally) contain numerous hints at and prophecies of the higher dispensation to come. Thus, even while being superseded, the Christian teachings can still serve a

24 *Sheng-ching yü T’ien-tao*, p.18-22.

positive purpose in the age of White Yang by leading those believers who know how to understand them correctly towards the true Tao.<sup>25</sup> As ultimate salvational efficacy, however, flows exclusively from the transmission of this Tao, the step beyond “the old principles” of Christianity is absolutely necessary and is urged again and again by Jesus himself in his séance appearances. Above we have only adduced a few Jesus texts composed in the 1930s and 1940s. However, Jesus’ séance appearances continued afterwards and perhaps became even more important with the I-Kuan Tao’s increasing drive to proselytize overseas -- especially in North America, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, areas where the its missionaries were likely to frequently encounter Christians as potential converts. The most recent Jesus text available to me is the *Yeh-su Chi-tu sheng-hsün* 《耶穌基督聖訓》. This lengthy spirit-written text was recorded in Taiwan in 1989 and is circulated in a Chinese-English bilingual edition with the English title “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”. While produced by a somewhat controversial subgroup in the I-Kuan Tao movement, this text repeats and reaffirms the key themes of the earlier Jesus texts.<sup>26</sup>

25 Having said this, I need to point out that there seems to be some disagreement in the sources about the appropriateness of Christianity as a gateway to the Tao. The afore-mentioned revised catechism, the *Hsing-li t'i-shih chü-chieh* (see above footnote 20) states that after the return of Jesus to Heaven, the heavenly mandate for the teachings he established was revoked, so that “it is impossible to find truth by way of the cross” (*Hsing-li t'i-shih chü-chieh*, p.79). The 1948 catechism *Chen-li Chiang-i* had stipulated a revocation of the mandate for Islam, but not for Christianity (p.378). This stricture was apparently broadened to include Christianity by the time the *Hsing-li t'i-shih* was compiled.

26 *Yeh-su Chi-tu sheng-hsün* 《耶穌基督聖訓》 / *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. A new and rather unusual feature of this Christmas day séance record is the fact that Jesus’ arrival is heralded by that well-known Christian paragon -- Santa Claus! The group behind this revelation is the “Buddha Maitreya Court of Celestial Grace” (T’ien-en Mi-le-fo yüan 天恩彌勒佛院) of the elder Wang

In conclusion, what we are finding in these sources is not an acceptance of the Jesus Christ propagated by Christian missionaries, but his appropriation on the terms of I-Kuan Tao's doctrinal system. Jesus is divested of all characteristics central to a Christian understanding of his person, nature, and meaning. Instead of being the Christ he becomes a sage in the service of a higher Tao, an emissary of Heaven sent to fulfil a limited role in a grander scheme of salvation. Jesus' appearance in I-Kuan Tao spirit-writing séances ultimately serves to affirm the global validity of its worldview. Jesus is reinterpreted to fit harmoniously into a religious system that owes next to nothing to the Christian gospel. He is relegated to the position of a sage of the past with little active contribution to the grand design of salvation put into practice in the present age by the Venerable Mother and her new emissaries. The Five Teachings and their founders fade into the background as we reach the new age of White Yang and its promise of full and final propagation of the Tao. Jesus' role here is merely to acknowledge that this Tao finishes what he began in a previous, more limited age. As a result the I-Kuan Tao version of Jesus differs significantly from his various appropriations and interpretations in the multi-faceted world of Christian denominationalism. Any attempt at interreligious dialogue based on shared symbols such as Jesus Christ needs to take this diversity of appropriation and interpretation into account. In the final section of this essay, I will probe some of the implications for such a dialogue between I-Kuan Tao and Christianity.

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Hao-te 王好德. See Clart 2000: 135-136 for further details on this subject.

Elder Wang has given lectures on this Jesus text which have been published by his group (See *Ch'ien-jen tz'u-pei Chiang-chieh Yeh-su Chi-tu sheng-tan tz'u-pei chih-shih hsün* 《前人慈悲講解耶穌基督聖誕慈悲指示訓》 / Preaching of Jesus Christ's Revelation by His Holiness, Great Master Wang).

### 3. INCLUSIVISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

First, let me emphasize that the appropriation of Jesus by another religion on its own terms is not unusual. We find other examples in Islam (Jesus as prophet), Vaishnavite Hinduism (Jesus as avatar of Vishnu), Brazilian Umbanda (Jesus as Orixá Maior), and many new religious movements that have arisen since the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> In Hinduism, the interpretation of Jesus as an avatar is part of a larger inclusivist approach that seeks to encompass Christianity (and other religions) in the Hindu tradition. For twentieth century thinkers such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) the quintessence of Hinduism was to be found in the Vedanta. Indologist Paul Hacker analyses Radhakrishnan's outlook as follows:

**Thus the Vedanta is the unifying element in the multiplicity of the religious views and practices of Hinduism and of all religions. It is precisely the somewhat vague character of Radhakrishnan's Vedanta which makes it capable of such a role. [...] We must remember that Radhakrishnan, like more or less all Hindus today, affirms that all**

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27 Johann Figl (1994) offers a convincing argument that we need to distinguish between traditional forms of inclusivism as we find them in, say, Christianity and Islam, and those evinced by modern religious movements. His case-study of Hazrat Inayat Khan's (1882-1927) "Sufi Movement" as such a new religious movement demonstrates an approach to the major religions that shows some parallels to that of I-Kuan Tao. This approach includes the claim to fulfil and supersede the traditional religions in the name of a higher mystical truth, a claim supported by an esoteric reading of these religions' scriptures which often has little to do with the religions' own orthodox interpretations, but which is deemed to open up a new and deeper level of understanding for the initiated.



religions are equal in their worth or essence or aim. If, however, the hidden goal or center or essence of all religions is the Vedanta, which primarily constitutes the spiritual unity of Hinduism, then all religions are in a way included in Hinduism. This is the most comprehensive application which the principle of inclusivism has ever found. Incidentally, it would perhaps be more accurate to speak of inclusivism in many cases where we are inclined to see Hindu tolerance.<sup>28</sup>

Such “inclusivism,” which Paul Hacker analysed in a number of publications,<sup>29</sup> is not the only Hindu approach to other religions. We also find “exclusivist” positions (which hold that no salvation is to be found in any other paths) and “pluralist” ones (which see all religious paths as equally valid without subsuming them into one superior path).<sup>30</sup> As such the scope of Hindu views of other religions is at least as broad as that of the Christian theology of religions, which is predicated on the same three basic positions:

- ( 1 ) Exclusivism: Only Christianity possesses ultimate truth and the path to salvation. Other religions have no salvation to offer and either no truth, or only partial, incomplete truths.
- ( 2 ) Pluralism: All religions of the world are based on a universal desire to know God and all of them ultimately lead to God. The common image used to illustrate this position is that of the mountain summit

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28 Hacker 1995: 245-246.

29 See the essays by Hacker and on Hacker's hypothesis in Oberhammer 1983.

30 See Panikkar 1981, 45-48; Sharma 2005, Aleaz 2005, Rao 2005.

to which many paths lead. Since they all reach the summit, they are equally valid.

These are thumbnail sketches of the three basic positions; there actually exist numerous subtypes among them that I don't need to discuss here.<sup>31</sup> Let's focus on the inclusivist position, which I would argue best describes the approach taken by I-Kuan Tao towards Jesus Christ specifically and Christianity (and other religions) in general. My interest here is to probe briefly the Christian experience with inclusivism as a way of (1) evaluating the merits and inherent problems of such an approach, and (2) to assess its impact on an eventual dialogue between I-Kuan Tao and Christianity.

A common view of Christianity that I encounter among Taiwanese religious practitioners is that it supposedly "rejects other religions" (*paichi tajiao* 排斥他教). In other words, Christianity is widely perceived to adopt an exclusivist stance. This is certainly true for some churches, but interestingly not for the largest Christian denomination, the Roman Catholic Church. The official position of this church is an inclusivist one, which grants truth and value to other religions, but ultimately sees them as incomplete and finding their completion only in Christ. This is in particular the theological position of the present pope, Benedict XVI. In writings composed shortly before his elevation to the papacy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger argued for a view of Catholic relations with other religions predicated on the firm belief of history culminating in the redemption through Christ. All of humanity is (through God's covenant with Noah) part of this soteriological scheme and all human religion moves towards its inevitable centre: Christ. Thus, other religions are in a sense provisional and preparatory to Christianity and will find the fullness of truth and redemption only in

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31 For more information on and analysis of this model see Schmidt-Leukel 1997 and 2005; Griffiths 2001.

Christ.<sup>32</sup> Ratzinger is influenced in this stance by his teacher, Karl Rahner, who coined the famous phrase “anonymous Christians.”<sup>33</sup> In Rahner’s interpretation, as all religions lead to Christ, all of its adherents really are already Christians—anonymous Christians, unbeknownst to others and themselves. The task of Christian missions then is not so much to convert them to a completely alien religion, but to complete them in what they already are, to offer them the redemptive grace of Christ as that to which their own religions have always been leading up to without ever reaching it. From an inclusivist standpoint, other religions are incomplete Christianities. Rahner’s is a modern reformulation of a time-honoured position that can be traced back to the New Testament itself and was elaborated upon by the Church Fathers, influencing Catholic theology through the ages.<sup>34</sup>

If we were to try a Christian-inclusivist reading of I-Kuan Tao, it would probably look something like this: I-Kuan Tao responds to the universal human need for God and salvation. The Tao it confers in its initiation is a reflection of the redemptive grace of Christ that gives us salvation and closeness to God, so that by seeking the Tao, I-Kuan Tao adherents are really seeking after Christ. I-Kuan Tao may serve as a *preparatio evangelica* by preparing its adherents for the reception of the true mystery, that of our redemption by participation in Christ’s sacrifice through baptism. The Tao “properly” understood is Christ. The Christian interpreter would reverse the I-Kuan Tao interpretation: It is not the Cross that stands for the mystery of the Tao; rather, the mystery of the Tao is the Cross.

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32 Ratzinger 2003. Also see Ratzinger 1998.

33 See Rahner 1962, Rahner 1965.

34 Jacques Solé gives a fascinating account of the hegemony the idea of religious unity held in European thought from in the 16th and 17th centuries (Solé 1979: 115-173). For an overview of Catholic views of the soteriological status of other religions, see Waldenfels 1969.

I am not aware of the existence of such a Christian reading specifically of I-Kuan Tao teachings, but consider the Church Father Justin Martyr's (100-165) theology of Logos: The divine Logos suffuses all of creation, is grasped after by all true philosophy, is present in the covenantal history of Israel, and took on human form in Christ. The Logos thus connects all humanity and leads it to its supreme manifestation, Christ. Therefore, the ancient Greek philosophers were "really" seeking Christ all along and thus were Christians without knowing it.<sup>35</sup> Replace "Logos" with "Tao" in Justin's argument and you will see that it is fairly easily transferable to I-Kuan Tao.

How would religious dialogue work in a situation where both sides employ inclusivist strategies? Where each side says, "We can get along, because we both seek the same thing; the difference being that I am closer to the aim than you, that you are seeking to get where I am already"? We might say that this is a better starting point than exclusivism which would make dialogue impossible from the outset. However, an inclusivist dialogue would not be an easy thing either when both parties start out from an assumption of superiority that seeks to subordinate the other as a lesser version of itself. And indeed, this is one of the main charges brought against inclusivism: that its apparent openness towards other religions is really just apparent and hides a motive to encompass, subsume, subordinate the Other.<sup>36</sup> An inclusivist dialogue would yield no knowledge of the Other as long as each party insisted on its own perfection and saw in the other only a twisted mirror image or incomplete copy of itself. I-Kuan Tao readings of Jesus remind me strongly of traditional Catholic inclusivist strategies in trying to encompass other religions in the service of a higher Truth, and as such are not likely to provide

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35 Schmidt-Leukel 1997: 171-172.

36 A Christian (exclusivist) critique of I-Kuan Tao inclusivism as directed at Christianity can be found in Wang 1991: 57-59.

a fruitful foundation for religious dialogue.

What are the alternatives? Well, there is always pluralism, but that would mean abandoning claims to the possession of a universally valid truth, which are as central to I-Kuan Tao as they are to the Catholic Church. If dialogue is still desired, exclusivism is out of the question as well, quite aside from the problems it raises for the plausibility of said claims of universality. So, in a sense we are stuck with inclusivism. Fortunately, the inclusivist setting has developed beyond its traditional formulation among Catholic theologians, and attempts have been made to come up with a more “dialogue-friendly” version of it. An example is Jacques Dupuis’s “theology of religious pluralism,” which in spite of the title is a version of inclusivism. Dupuis’ “inclusive pluralism” protects other religions from Christian co-optation by viewing them as part of God’s plan. They are not in a provisional state, waiting to be fulfilled in Christ, but in their present state have a contribution to make in God’s plan for humankind. Therefore they have positive things to offer from which the Christian must learn and enrich his/her own religious experience. By this twist, Dupuis attributes truth and value to other religions without abandoning Christianity’s claim to universality. This does not quite give us the equality of all traditions that pluralism claims, but it does make each religion a locus of authentic knowledge of God and a source of new insight for everyone, including the (otherwise still privileged) Christian. Under this premise, dialogue would be possible and even desirable.<sup>37</sup>

Another approach has recently been developed from a Buddhist perspective by Kristin Beise Kiblinger. She advocates a complex form of inclusivism that seeks to respect the integrity of the other tradition’s ideas as part of an autonomous religious system, even while carefully comparing, learning, and borrowing to enrich one’s

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37 Dupuis 1997; Dupuis 2002; Merrigan 2003.

own tradition. Her “ideal generic inclusivists” would be

... committed to their respective traditions as universally true, not as true just for the home group—in other words, they avoid privatizing—though they recognize that alien traditions may make reciprocal universal claims. Nevertheless, alternative-ends-recognizing inclusivists are humble and motivated to look to others [...] Ideally, their way of going about accessing others is akin to how an anthropologist gains insight into another culture. They proceed with tentative exploration that brackets home presuppositions and habits, carefully heeding the self-descriptions of others and not assuming overwhelming agreement *a priori*. As long as there is some tradition-specific justification for recognizing differences, these inclusivists aim to minimize imposition and distortion, and they turn to particulars with a willingness to reject what does not fit into the home framework, rather than forcefully squeezing the square peg of the alien element into the round hole of the home tradition. The strength or degree of their inclusivism may vary, depending on tradition-specific (and internally varying) theological judgments.<sup>38</sup>

As the jargon in this passage indicates, Kiblinger provides a thorough philosophical foundation for her approach. Her book is a well-founded analysis of and plea for a Buddhist inclusivism and as such may provide inspirations for other Asian religious traditions as

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38 Kiblinger 2005: 28-29.

well in that it offers a model of inclusivism that manages to be self-critical in its approach to other traditions and to maintain openness to new ideas without relinquishing commitment to one's own tradition.<sup>39</sup>

I am not sure if either Dupuis' or Kiblinger's brands of inclusivism will "catch on" in practical religious dialogue, but they are valiant and valuable endeavours to help such dialogues along and may perhaps serve as models for fruitful conversations between *tao-ch'in* 道親 and Christians. Such a conversation has not really begun yet, so perhaps this is an opportunity to start it off on the right footing. That such dialogue is needed should be beyond doubt in these days of religious conflict and murmurs of a clash of civilizations. These lines were written in the days of Muslim uproar over Pope Benedict XVI's citation of an Islam-critical statement by a Byzantine emperor of the 14<sup>th</sup> century during a lecture at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006. This incident goes to show how easy it is to cause offence and worsen rather than alleviate conflict.

Successful dialogue requires that we are aware of how we approach our conversation partners, and what impact words that may seem innocuous to us may have on them. An inclusivist approach to religious dialogue carries a particular responsibility to take account of others on their own terms, without remaking them in our own image, which would not only insult our partners, but also keep us from learning anything in the conversation.

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39 Hans Küng calls for a similar approach of taking as one's point of departure the other tradition's understanding of its scriptures and tenets, instead of imposing one's own reading on them. In his view, such an intellectual effort on both sides is fundamental to any meaningful dialogue between Christianity and equally inclusivist traditions such as Islam and Hinduism. See Küng 1984: 174-176, 404-406.

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