

# Heaven in China without “Religion” And Manifestation

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“The Mandate of Heaven,  
How beautiful and unceasing!  
Oh, how glorious  
Was the purity of King Wen’s virtue!  
With blessings he overwhelms us.  
We will receive the blessings.  
They are a great favor from our King Wen.  
May his descendents hold fast to them”.  
(*Book of Odes*, ode no. 267, “The Mandate of Heaven”)

It has often been asked by Bahá’ís who inquire into such things, “How is it that China developed as it did, into a society founded upon morals and ethical principles, without the acknowledged presence of an ‘identifiable’ Manifestation of God?” This question seems to lead many into searching for answers, into an understanding based upon a predominantly Western notion of “religion,” or reaching back through philosophical works attempting to find justification for asserting that, in fact, ancient China did have a Prophet. This assertion is based upon the belief that there never was a time that humanity was without a Prophet to guide it, and perhaps in the case of China, the absence of clear reference to such a Personage is indicative of the ancientness of such a Being. Absence of such records should not persuade us of the absence of such guidance, given the belief that “[T]he only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic prophets is because their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history... We are taught there always have been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, some conclude that China *may*

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<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi in, H. Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, rev. ed., 1988, No. 1696, p. 503.

have had such a Prophet for guidance. Unfortunately, as there is no evidence to support such a contention, and since a Bahá'í-Chinese dialogue cannot be based upon such a contention in today's academic milieu demanding empirical evidence, perhaps a different approach may enable us to contemplate religion without a Prophet.

This paper will present some ideas that may enable us to begin an approach to this query from a different perspective. It will also present briefly some teachings of the Bahá'í corpus that indicate a harmonious manner of conceiving what we discern in Chinese philosophy. In making this assertion, it will be necessary to suspend our notions of "religion" and adopt a more inclusive construct.<sup>2</sup> We are emboldened in this manner of advancing by a definition offered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We read: "Religion, then, is the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things..."<sup>3</sup> And in another passage we read, "... religion is the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things."<sup>4</sup> We also notice another passage that forces us to stop and ponder deeply: "Now concerning nature, it is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things."<sup>5</sup> Religion is the necessary or essential "connection," and nature is the "essential properties and necessary relations." If one takes a brief perusal at the corpus of Bahá'í Writings existing in translation, it will become apparent that the dominant view of religion, as heretofore used and taught in many Western constructs, is too limited. Even if we take an etymological view, religion is derived either from the Latin *religare* meaning "to bind fast," or from *religio*, which is what the Church Fathers derived from *religare*; it could even be from *religere* which means to "go through again, think over, recollect, or consider carefully." Thus, we see in the Western word "religion" a few ways of conceiving it. What 'Abdu'l-Bahá permits us to do is to radically rethink this concept, and to begin to ponder religion in a manner that is not fixed by specific definition.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Bahá'í Writings, we find many "definitions" or characterizations of the term religion that indicate the need for a broader consideration than a doctrine or set of teachings.

<sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Translated by Laura Clifford-Barney. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1981, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> Tablet to Dr. August Forel, *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. XV, pp. 37-43. MARS computer data base.

One current Bahá'í thinker defines religion, based upon this conceptual clarification by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, by asserting that it "is the name we give to the *relationship* or link between these two values, God and humanity. The living embodiment of this link is the Manifestation. Religion thus consists of the three fundamental components: God, Man and the relationship between God and Man, namely the Manifestation."<sup>6</sup> This central component, this tripartite relationship will become clear as we contemplate the concept of tian/heaven as it developed within Chinese thought. It needs commenting, though, that this tripartite relationship extends beyond the Manifestation as the connective "link" with an Unknown Deity, and is reflected in the injunctions found in the Bahá'í religious corpus that "He who knoweth himself knows his Lord."<sup>7</sup> This is similar to the relational view espoused in many Chinese philosophical works, wherein we learn that "He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows *tian*."<sup>8</sup> It is herein contended that if we limit our view of religion to a connective link between an Unknown (and Unknowable) Reality and the Manifestation or Prophet that is the "Spokesman" for this Reality, we endanger the fundamental relationship that emanates from the "reality of things." The relationship which results from the connections emanating from the reality of things could be construed to be, in Chinese thought, what was discussed as Principle (*Li*), which in Neo-Confucian thought, subsumed the notion of heaven (*tian*).

In the Chinese *Weltanschauung*, that is, world-view, there is not a unique word for religion. As Phyllis Chew informs us, "In discussing the 'Chinese religion', one should note too that there is no Chinese word that corresponds exactly to the word 'religion.' To the Chinese there is no difference between religion and education. The Chinese people use the word 'teaching' (*chiao*) to include all religions."<sup>9</sup> In fact, for one who

<sup>6</sup> W.S. Hatcher, *Ethics of Authenticity*, Book 1, International Moral Education Project, p.3, St. Petersburg, Russia, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1976, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Mencius 7A: 1, cited in Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 1963, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> P.G.L. Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*, 1993, p. 20. [One is challenged by most works on Chinese thought to find the current transliterated term. E.g. *chiao* as used in this passage follows the old Wales-Giles system of transliteration. The current system, in use since 1949, is Pinyin. This system was an attempt at standardization. Thus, the current word is *jiao*. Through out this paper, I will provide both

peruses Chinese thought, to find such a differentiating term would be surprising. In the current English-Chinese dictionaries, religion is transliterated from *zongjiao*; *zong* is the 1<sup>st</sup> tone and means ancestor or school, and *jiao* is the 4<sup>th</sup> tone and means teach, instruct and consult. Chinese philosophy and religion are characterized by one essential fact: there never was conceived to be a separation between Tian/Heaven and Earth and Humanity. The central idea of this article is that it was, among other factors, the notion of tian/heaven and its implicit unity with Earth and Humanity that provided the religious orientation to Chinese culture and philosophy. Since this trinitarian construct is central to Chinese thought, it would behove us to pare it down and consider the idea of tian/heaven. In so doing, we will be permitted a glimpse into a fundamental thread that runs through the Chinese *Weltanschauungen*. The lack of separation between Humanity and heaven implies much for a world-view that is oriented by observation of the principles of nature, and a deduction from these into the essential human principles of social and personal life.

The Chinese word for heaven is *t'ien/tian* and carries translations that differ in dictionaries:

“The standard Chinese-*English* dictionary translations for *tian* are: (1) the material heavens, the firmament, the sky; (2) the weather; (3) a day; (4) Heaven Providence, God, Nature; (5) husband; (6) indispensable. In spite of some overlap, these equivalences contrast rather starkly with those provided by the Chinese-*Chinese* dictionary: (1) the sky; (2) qi; (3) the movement and pattern of the heavens; (4) the sun; (5) spirituality/divinity/mystery (*shen*); (6) nature, what is so-of-itself (*ziran*) ... The most significant gap in these two definitions of *tian* is the clear absence of “Heaven, Providence, God, Nature” in the Chinese dictionary. In fact, the dualism that requires appeal to transcendent deity in the Western tradition has no relevance at all to Chinese culture.”<sup>10</sup>

This passage is offered to orient our ponderings, and provides our ponderings with a view of the orient. What we clearly notice in many

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transliterated terms for scholarly and common usage. See Chew's work, p. xi, for similar reasons in her choice of systems.]

<sup>10</sup> D. Hall, R. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, 1998, p. 235.

discussions, based upon the denotations of the term, is a diversity and plurality of views. It may plausibly be asserted that the absence of these three terms is indicative of the dominant Marxist-materialist philosophy and cultural values in modern China, and does not indicate what the authors cited may take it to mean. The work of Hall and Ames makes a strong and cogent case that in Chinese thought, at least in the Han dynastic times (206 BC-220 AD), that had significant impact upon subsequent philosophical thought, there was no notion of a transcendent *tian* (also spelled *t'ien* by some)/"heaven." This evocation of transcendence is, they assert, a Western conceptual overlay due to its inherent dichotomous thought. They are not alone in the insistence that the notion of transcendence that is dominant in the Western philosophical tradition is not applicable to Chinese thought, while other authors make assertions that, in fact, the concept of *tian* involves the notion of transcendence. That there will ever be a resolution to this debate is uncertain; what is certain is that the authors who debate these issues are involved in a process of hermeneutics and interpretation. What is also certain is that, even in translations of the ancient texts, translators give differing views.

One factor we are contemplating in this article, spelled out only briefly here, is that of semantic slides. Semantics, as the field that studies word use and meaning, indicates that the words we use change over time, "slide" upward or downward in their usage. Thus, we note that the Greek term *psyche* originally was used to refer to "breath," underwent a slide to imply the "soul". Likewise, as we ponder the Chinese term *tian*, it may serve us well to consider that what we may observe in our understandings of its referent is how the meaning of *tian* is changing in human consciousness and usage. *Even if* traditional Chinese culture had no overt belief, expressed philosophically, about a transcendent field or Being in a manner consonant with Western thought, the fact that many are now "seeing it" or "reading it into the texts" does not imply its presence or absence *for the originators of the texts*. It implies a different understanding. But this is exactly what has occurred in the West; we clearly witness it in the Chinese interpretations of their early philosophical texts, beginning with the different understandings of *tian* in Confucius/Kongzi, and his successor, Mencius. It should be noted here that the Chinese term *tian*, often translated as "H/heaven" by some,

"N/nature" by others, may best be left untranslated. We shall observe this in what follows.

In pre-Zhou dynastic times (before 1100 BC), we find the word *Ti* (*Di*) existed when referring to a tribal Lord. This tribal concept was later expanded to mean the Deity for all humanity. "In the Shang [dynasty], he was the supreme anthropomorphic deity who sent blessings or calamities, gave protection in battles, sanctioned undertakings, and passed on the appointment or dismissal of officials. Such belief continued in the early Chou [Zhou], but was gradually replaced by the concept of Heaven (*T'ien*) as the supreme spiritual reality."<sup>11</sup> This supremacy of *Ti* which was later transformed into *Tian*, occurred in the Shang times (1600-1100 BC) and "coincides with the supremacy of the Shang and its ruling clan."<sup>12</sup> The continuance of this God-concept seems to be relatively stable at an early date, and is reminiscent of a similar transformation that occurred in the Israeli tradition when Yahweh was "transformed" from a local tribal volcano god into the Supreme Deity. In China, *Tian* was perceived as intimately involved in human affairs, especially the ruling dynasty. The king was the counterpart of *Tian*, as the Son of Heaven, and *Tian* bestowed favour upon righteous kings, and sent portents if the dynasty fell into disfavour through disregard for the proper rules of conduct (*li*). Thus, the concept of *Tian Ming*, the Mandate of Heaven, played a significant role in Chinese socio political history. This remained consistent until the establishment of the People's Republic in 1911.

It is important at the outset to acknowledge that there is not unequivocal certainty as to the historical origin of the word or its referent. "The etymological origins of the term *t'ien* are obscure. The earliest unambiguous instances of usage date from the early Western Chou, that is, the eleventh century BC."<sup>13</sup> Eno's work reviews two of the dominant theories of the origin of *tian* and finds in both plausible and implausible referents. He asserts that the tradition associated with the word indicates that it might have referred to *tian* as the literal sky, the direction that the ashes of the dead floated. This created in the minds of the people, an

<sup>11</sup> W. T. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 1963, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in B.I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 1985, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> R. Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery*, 1990, p. 181.

association with immortality, death and a cosmic order. It also indicated the importance in China of ancestor worship.

After the Shang and during the Chou/Zhou dynasties, the concept of *tian* is seen to appear with that of *Di*--God. "Just how the three terms were understood in the early Zhou is less than clear, but it appears that, over time, the term *di* would come to be used increasingly not to refer to a supreme deity, as in the Shang, but to the supreme ruler of human society, the emperor, while the word *tian* or 'Heaven', would more often be employed to denote the power that governed all creation."<sup>14</sup> However this may be, it is generally mentioned that the "[U]ses of the word also varied over time and among different filiations or schools of thought."<sup>15</sup> It will be helpful to keep this in mind as we proceed.

Kongzi (Confucius 531-479 BC) used the appellation *Tian* instead of the more personal *Ti* when referring to heaven. The recorded sayings of the Master in *The Analects*, which was likely written down by his followers, had a more naturalistic conception than personal. *Tian* operated in the affairs of Humanity through Nature, which were regular, seasonal and balanced between the opposites of *Yin* and *Yang*, as well as the Five Agents (*Wu Xing*): earth, fire, metal, water, and wood. In the Chinese tradition, there were Five Classics that were central to Confucian ideology: the Book of Documents/History (*Shu Jing*); the Book of Songs/Odes (*Shi Jing*); the Book of Changes (*I Qing* or *Yi Jing*); the Book of Rites (*Li Ji*); and the Book of Ceremonies/Spring and Autumn Annals (*Yi Li*).

Each of these books present images of *tian*/heaven that are complementary. We shall limit ourselves to a consideration of *tian*/heaven as it is presented in the works attributed to Kongzi, and the Confucian School, and the *Yi Jing* (I Ching). The reason for limiting our inquiry is not only due to the complexity of the idea, but also due to the diversity of views in the Chinese tradition. From 1313 until 1905, a Confucian quadrad known as the Four Books was the required standard for civil service examinations in the country. These four books were *The Analects*

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<sup>14</sup> W. DeBary, and I. Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999; p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170.

(Lunyu)<sup>16</sup>, the *Book of Mencius*, the *Great Learning (Da Xue)* and the *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yung)*. The interpretations used were those of Chu Hsi (*Zhu Xi*), 1130-1200 AD, who established Neo-Confucian ideology in ways that stripped it of its Daoist and Buddhist influences that had gathered over the decades. Thus, even though we will look only at Confucian tradition, this in no way detracts from the understanding we can gain of *tian*/heaven, nor imply the insignificance of Daoist views.

We find in the Yin Yang School, which developed the doctrine of *yin* and *yang* to cosmological principles from the likely origin of referring to physical phenomena, a philosophy that impacted all aspects of Chinese civilization. *Tian*/Heaven is said to have given King Yu, the founder of the Xia dynasty (2200-1700 BC) the Nine Categories. These were central to philosophy, in various guises. These categories have been given as consisting of sets of five and include: five agents (elements); five activities; five directions; five arrangements of time; five musical notes; five grains; five sense organs; five atmospheric conditions; five metals. The Five Agents, or Five Elements were used conceptually to extend to different dynastic reigns, thus each dynasty was characterized by a particular manner represented by an element, and a particularly dominant colour. "Philosophically, however, it resulted not only in the concept of a common law governing both man and Nature, but also in a most important doctrine that has dominated Chinese philosophy in the last eight hundred years, namely the unity of man and Nature, or 'Nature and man forming one body'."<sup>17</sup> There is little remaining of this school of thought, but its impact was highly significant.

Heaven, as a term used by translators of Chinese thought, was translated from *tian*. However, this term was also translated more in the sense of "nature" by many of Kongzi's followers, thus presenting a philosophy that was integrated with the human world. In *The Analects*, when *tian* is mentioned, it is usually with reference to an impersonal, but conscious order, or being. This does not mean that Kongzi disavowed belief in a personal heaven, but that the interpretations usually offered on this theme

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that even this term, translated from the term Lunyu, comes from the Greek term *analekta* meaning "selection," while it could just as well be defined as "conversations, discussions, or viewpoints." I am indebted to the presentation of this concept in DeBary and Bloom, see p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> B.I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought*, 1990, p. 246.

are presented more naturalistically. A modern interpreter presents an image of Kongzi and asserts that he was deeply religious from his youth, and inculcated this religiosity in his followers.<sup>18</sup> *Analects* (14, 37) is a comment on Kongzi's belief that Heaven knows him and his purpose. We read: "But there is Heaven, He knows me!" Another interpreter gives us this: "It is heaven that knows me." We notice immediately the personalistic attribution in the first translation by Jingpan, and this may be due, in part, to his education at a St. John's University in Shanghai, a Christian university. We also notice that in the first translation, Heaven is given, while the second has heaven. The capitalization of the transliterated term may be indicative of a Western oriented transcendental bias, but no matter what, it is indicative of semantic changes. Heaven must be transcendent, and must be "H" since this indicates a superior reality. Be that as it may, *tian*/heaven was intimately concerned with Kongzi's mission. In *The Analects* we also find that *tian*/heaven communicates through Nature (17, 19), and has been interpreted to imply that Nature is an "emanation" of Heaven.<sup>19</sup> This is not an interpretation that stands alone, but seems to represent an idea common among translators. Heaven could be offended against, and then one would have no recourse to assistance from another source (*Analects* 3, 13). In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, attributed to Kongzi's grandson Zi Si, and taken as the authentic words of Kongzi, we find: "The ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth are those by which we serve Shang Ti (God)." (19, 6)<sup>20</sup> We also find it translated as "Lord on High" instead of Shang Ti as God.

Kongzi's role was, as presented by himself, not a reformer, but a transmitter. This has been debated, but in his transmission of the concept of *tian*/heaven, he seems to hold to the view as expressed in the earlier Chinese religious traditions.<sup>21</sup> As long as there were noble men and sages

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<sup>18</sup> Jingpan Chen, *Confucius as a Teacher: Philosophy of Confucius with Special Reference to Its Educational Implications*, 1990. This work was originally written as a Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Toronto in 1940.

<sup>19</sup> For example, see B.I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 1985 p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> This is Jingpan's translation in op. cit., p. 362, but is consistent with other translations available.

<sup>21</sup> The debate in this arena is summed up as follows: the "Ancient Text" school asserts that Kongzi was a transmitter of ancient knowledge, and what we read in the *Analects* should read this; the "Modern Text" school asserts that Kongzi was a reformer, and he simply asserted it was not out of genuine humility and cultural propensity to not assert one's self.

who worked to redeem mankind from straying from the *Dao*, the Way, heaven supports their workings, even if it is inscrutable to individuals. In fact, we find in *The Doctrine of the Mean* passages that require our reflection:

“(31) Only the perfect sage in the world has quickness of apprehension, intelligence, insight, and wisdom, which enable him to rule all men; magnanimity, generosity, benignity, and tenderness, which enable him to embrace all men...Therefore we say that he is a counterpart of Heaven.

(32) Only those who are absolutely sincere can order and adjust the great relations of mankind, establish the great foundations of humanity, and know the transforming and nourishing operations of heaven and earth. Does he depend on anything else? How earnest and sincere--he is humanity! How deep and unfathomable--he is abyss! How vast and great--he is heaven! Who can know him except he who really has quickness of apprehension, intelligence, sageliness, wisdom, and understands character of Heaven?”<sup>22</sup>

In these passages we notice clearly that the sage is the counterpart of heaven, and *is heaven*. No sense of transcendence is implied here, but an immanence that the sage embodied. In fact, the entire corpus of Confucian philosophy was about embodiment and *becoming* a sagely person. The rectification of one's conduct and names, the becoming *ren*, or the noble person (*junzi*), having integrity, and living up to one's word, is about embodying the qualities and characteristics that these entail. So, even if Kongzi did not overtly talk about *tian*, in a doctrinal sense, but only informs us that he did not talk about it, it does not tell us why or if he believed it was immanent or transcendent (if these terms even are applicable).<sup>23</sup>

One of Kongzi's grandson's disciples was Mencius/Mengzi/Meng Ke (371-289 BC). Little is known about his life, but the extant writings attributed to him clearly show a continuance of the personal idea of Heaven. He believed that God (*Di*) was the supreme moral authority, and

Fundamentally, we do not know! For a concise discussion, see Wing-Tsit Chan, p. 314; or Jingpan, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> W.T. Chan, *A Source of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 112. Other translations differ, and the one by Hall and Ames is consistent. Others provide the expression: “He is like heaven”.

<sup>23</sup> See Analects 5, 12.

humanity's goal was to live a life in order to keep the harmony with *tian*/heaven. He also spoke as if he had a role to play in continuing the transmission of *tian*/heaven's dictates to humanity. We read: "Heaven's plan in the production of mankind is this--that they who are first informed should instruct those who are later on being informed, and they who first apprehend principles should instruct those who are slower to do so. I am one of Heaven's people who have first apprehended; -- I will take these principles and instruct this people in them. If I do not instruct them, who will do so?"<sup>24</sup> We thus notice a clear notion of *tian*/heaven as intimately involved and concerned with the affairs of Humanity, and Its spokesmen as striving to keep people following the Way of *tian*/heaven. *Tian*/heaven has endowed Humanity with faculties and senses. Humanity's task is to use these senses, under the control of the mind, to find the principles inherent in all things. "If we do not think, we will not get them. This is what Heaven has given to us. If we first build up the nobler part of our nature, then the inferior part cannot overcome it. It is simply this that makes a great man."<sup>25</sup>

Following Mengzi, Xun Kuang, or Xunzi (?310 BC-?215 BC), an influential scholar at the Jixia Academy in the feudal state of Qi, presents *tian* as simply natural order that does not interfere with human affairs and should not be interfered upon by humans. It is, rather, the given context within which all beings exist. As natural order, it is unconcerned with the dynastic changes, or the fortunes of any sovereign or individual; but individual effort and responsibility is required. The complementarity that exists with *tian*/heaven and Humanity, and the recognition of the trinity of these and Earth, formed a seminal idea in Confucian thought.<sup>26</sup>

Dong Zhong-Shu (Tung Chung Shu) was a minor philosopher who lived from 179-104 BC, but historically he is significant inasmuch as he was pivotal in getting Confucian philosophy to be the state doctrine. He saw the universe as an organic whole, and man as a microcosm. With Nature the macrocosm and Humanity the microcosm, the dynamic interplay observable in Nature were reflected in Humanity. *Tian*/heaven has its forces of *yin* and *yang*, the opposites of passive and active, etc., and

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 365. The translation is from J. Legge's work on Mengzi.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in W.T. Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> DeBary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 170.

Humanity likewise has its opposites of humanity (*jen/ren*) and greed. As *tian*/heaven can restrict the operations of these two forces, so can a person. From this, we are given to learn that *tian*/heaven and Humanity operate in a similar manner. On the personal level, humanity was viewed to have inherent goodness, but potentially so. What was needed was education to discipline this human nature. "The activity of Heaven extends to a certain point and then stops. What stops within the operation of Heaven is called human nature endowed by Heaven, and what stops outside the operation of Heaven is called human activity."<sup>27</sup> This dimension of human endeavour needs to be trained, thus the king and the sage are set up to provide the society in which these aspects can be cultivated. Dong Zhong-Shu even went to far as to make a correspondence with *tian*/heaven and the physical body, as we also notice in Jewish and Islamic mystical speculations, with the human mind resembling the spiritual intelligence of *tian*/heaven.

The persistence of the belief and teaching that *tian*/heaven, Earth, and Humanity formed a trinity was long lasting in Chinese thought. In generations of Confucians succeeding Mengzi, we notice a gradual transition in the idea of *tian*. Instead of maintaining the usual usage as *tian*/heaven, in a Zhou or Shang perspective, the developments and philosophical integration during the Han dynasty (202BC - 220 AD), it became to be presented more in reference to natural phenomena. In part this was due to Mengzi himself. He is quoted as saying, "He who exercises his mind to the utmost knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven." Another translation gives us: "He who fully realizes the potentialities of his heart knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven."<sup>28</sup> From this was deduced that *tian*/heaven was immanent in the heart of Humanity. What we also notice here is the use of mind and heart for the same term. This is not unusual, and represents the fact that one term, *xin*, is used for both ideas, and is often translated in more recent philosophical works as "mind-heart," or "heart-mind". The role of the sage is to continually guide mankind to what is immanent in human

<sup>27</sup> W.T. Chan, op. cit., p. 275. This concept is reminiscent of a work by P.D. Ouspenski, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, where he asserts a similar construct.

<sup>28</sup> These both are translations of 7, 1 of Mengzi's work. The first is by J. Legge, cited in Jingpan; the second by Lau, cited in Schwartz. Nature is translated from *xing*, usually given as "human nature" and mentioned in the Analects only twice, but developed more fully in Mengzi and other Confucianists.

nature, and to educate humanity in the proper use of the mind, and the right attachments of the heart, thus to "attain heaven."

A contemporary of Meng Zi was Xuanzi (Hsun Tzu), and he was often considered a rival to Mengzi's theories. Even though his thought dominated until the Han period (206 BC - 220 AD), Mengzi is considered as the heir of Kongzi's teachings. However, in Xuanzi, we notice clearly the presentation of *tian* in a more natural manner, and translators often use "nature" and this became part of many subsequent ideas of *tian*/heaven in Confucian philosophy. To him, *tian*/heaven was invisible and "The sage, however, does not seek to know Heaven. When the office of Heaven is established and the work of Heaven is done, the body will be provided and the spirit born, and the feelings of like, dislike, pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy embodied. These are called the natural feelings."<sup>29</sup> Nature and natural law is called *Dao* or *Li* (Principle), which everyone needs to obey. For Xuanzi, *tian*/nature and Earth were the source of life, and the noble man or the sage, formed a triad by following and embodying the principles of Nature. As we will see, from these followers of Kongzi, many others held to the notion that *tian*/heaven was immanent, and the role of the sage was not to attempt to discern *tian*/heaven's will, but to embody it. This embodiment was not accomplished only through Humanity, but became to be primarily reflected in the speculations and observations upon Nature as an embodiment of *tian*'s will.

Before progressing further in time, let us pause and consider the concept of *tian*/heaven as presented in the Book of Changes, the *Yi Jing*. This work, more than any other, formed a central basis of both Confucian and Daoist thought. This work is attributed to King Wen, who preceded Kongzi by about 500 years. While there are questions about some of the current text, there are parts that all scholars concur existed in pre-Confucian times. Both Kongzi and Laozi were reported to have consulted this work and meditated deeply upon its meanings. In this work, we notice that the first hexagram, *Ch'ien* (*Chen*), meaning the Creative, is connected with *tian*/heaven, and oftentimes, *ch'ien* is even translated as heaven. "Through the inclusion of the heavenly in the concept of creativity, something truly significant happens to heaven. It is drawn down out of its heights into the human cosmos. The divine heaven becomes a human

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in W.T. Chan, *A Source in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 118.

heaven. The idea of a divine heaven is also known in the Book of Changes, but the places where only the divine heaven are meant are so clear and stand in such a lively and fruitful contrast to those signifying the human heaven that the interplay is easily recognizable."<sup>30</sup>

We notice that the second hexagram, *K'un*, which is attributed to earth, is the counterpart of heaven. There is no duality implied in this construct, but a complementarity/polarity that is essential to Chinese thought. Heaven is *yang*, the ruler, the father, dynamic, creative, and bold; earth is *yin*, the subject, recipient, passive, and yielding. We see here that Nature is the counter-part of Heaven, and neither is complete without its complement. "Heaven is high, earth is low; thus the Creative and receptive are determined. In correspondence with this difference between low and high, inferior and superior places are established... In the heavens phenomena take form; on earth shapes take form. In this way change and transformation become manifest."<sup>31</sup>

The "Great Appendix" which discusses this book claims, "the *tao* of Heaven is in it; the *tao* of man is in it; the *tao* of earth is in it."<sup>32</sup> We also notice that the "Great Appendix" is referred to as "The Great Treatise" and was a commentary on the Book of Changes by successive generations of scholars. In this work we read: "The Book of Changes contains the measure of heaven and earth; therefore it enables us to comprehend the *tao* of heaven and earth and its order."<sup>33</sup> It is through contemplation on the changes visible in nature and humanity that the images of the trigrams (three lines, either broken or solid) were composed, combined into hexagrams, and said to represent all the manifold changes in existence. The persistence of the trinity of *tian*/heaven, Earth and Humanity is enforced and carries through to successive generations of Chinese. One significant fact of the Book of Changes is its pronouncements on life. It provided an imagistic and some say proto-philosophical view that looked to the natural world and its images and events to discern *tian*'s/heaven's ways. In this work, interpreters present spirit as connoting natural forces of observable life, and *tian*/heaven is conceived to be Principle (*Li*), a cornerstone idea of Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought.

<sup>30</sup> H. Wilhelm, *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes*, 1997, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> *The I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, translated by H. Wilhelm, 1977, p. 281.

<sup>32</sup> B.I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 1985, p. 394.

<sup>33</sup> H. Wilhelm, *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes*, 1997, p. 293.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, a revival of Confucian thought is seen in the philosophy of Han Yu and Li Ao. Before their time, Confucian doctrines were becoming more and more entangled with Daoist and Buddhist speculative ideas about mind, spirits, emptiness, and the reality or non-reality of created existence. These two worked to strip Confucianism of these tendencies, the inaction ascribed to by Daoists, and the silence and illusory nature of existence ascribed to by the Buddhists, and to return its focus to moral society and moral action. Neo-Confucian thought followed the reformulating by these two men, and is said to begin with Zhou Tun-i (Chou Tun-i) (1017-1073).<sup>34</sup> He re-establishes the philosophical focus upon human nature and the Way (*Dao*), which had been neglected in the intervening years due to too much emphasis upon textual studies of the classics, for attaining bureaucratic positions, and not enough upon living the implications of the views expressed.<sup>35</sup> One of his major works was "An Explanation of the Diagram of Great Ultimate," which gave the framework of Neo-Confucian metaphysics for centuries. "Therefore it is said that 'yin and yang' are established as the way of Heaven, the weak and strong as the way of Earth, and humanity and righteousness as the way of man."<sup>36</sup> The correlation between *tian*/heaven, Earth and Humanity is continued, and sincerity, righteousness, purity of heart, and other Confucian ideals again become the thrust of this philosophy.

Continuing the Neo-Confucian thought, we notice two brothers, Zheng Hao (Ch'eng Hao) and Zheng Yi (Ch'eng I) who rise to dominance and greatly impact later developments. In the case of the first brother (1032-1085), we see a focus on the manifestation of existents from the one principle (*li*), and his brother's (1033-1107) focus on production and reproduction. Zheng Hao's dominant motif is the Principle of Nature, that

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<sup>34</sup> There seems to be disagreement about this by various scholars, but let us not concern ourselves with this here.

<sup>35</sup> In considering Confucian philosophy, we must remember its integral relationship to bureaucracy in China. Ever since the implementation by King Wu (141-187 BC) of Academies, at the urging of Dong Zhongshu, the examinations for bureaucratic office were based upon Confucian texts. This guaranteed the dominance of Confucian over other philosophies, and integrally linked Confucian thought with political position. Thus, in understanding the development of Confucian thought, an awareness of this relationship is helpful. It was utilitarian to know the Classics, pragmatic and financial more than purely philosophical (if there was ever a time that it was since from its inception Confucianism was intimately concerned with the socio political order).

<sup>36</sup> W.T. Chan, *A Source in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 464.

is, *Tian-li*, the Principle of Heaven. This became to refer to Natural Law. "The great innovations of the Ch'engs, as we have seen, is the elevation of principle to the place formerly occupied by heaven; and this involves treating 'heaven' and its 'decree', as well as the 'Way', as merely names for different aspects of principle."<sup>37</sup> We even notice that the ancient term for Heaven, *Ti*, which also referred to God, becomes simply another name for Principle that controls all things. Both brothers adhere to this construct. We find, "Heaven is principle. 'The word 'psychic' refers to what is inscrutable in the innumerable things.' God (*ti*) is the name given to it as the ruler of events."<sup>38</sup> In this passage, psychic refers to a state of being that can also be characterized by integrity, or composure.

Semantic change, like what is witnessed in the alteration from *tian*/heaven as a ruling concept, as an ordering principle for human life, becoming subsumed under the rubric of Principle, indicates the non-theological nature of this concept in Chinese thought. More than that, it seems to demonstrate the alternative aspect of *religare*, that is, the aspect of relationship which is built upon "the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things." It is essential here that we briefly consider how Heaven became so subsumed.<sup>39</sup>

Since Confucian philosophy was not given over to speculative metaphysical thought in the same manner as found in Daoism, it remained grounded, so to speak, by "investigation into the nature of things," *ke-wu*. Even when Confucianism became embroiled in such debates, it was in response to Daoist and Buddhist philosophies. As indicated above, Confucianism always seemed to return to its "roots" in an embodied, life-as-lived, relationally-defined and textually documented approach.

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<sup>37</sup> A.C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 1992, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> In what follows, we shall follow one line of reasoning: the notion of Heaven was altered from a transcendent field that was also an immanent field. With *yin* and *yang*, at their extremities, *yang* becomes *yin*, and *yin* becomes *yang*. These corollaries are inherent in its polar dimension; thus to speak of an immanent-transcendent field is to acknowledge the polar necessities here as well. Below in the text, we shall present a view that eschews any notion of a transcendent reference to heaven. Ultimately, we must acknowledge that we do not know what the Chinese philosophers in the "Warring States" or Han dynasty believed. The hermeneutic process invariably involves the hermeneut's frame of reference and locus of understanding, etc.

The investigation into the nature of things has its origin in the *Da Xue*, the Great Learning. There, we read in Chapter 4: "Confucius said, 'In hearing litigations, I am as good as anyone. What is necessary is to enable people not to have litigations at all.' Those who would not tell the truth will not dare to finish their words, and a great awe would be struck into people's minds. This is called knowing the root." Chapter 5: "This is called knowing the root. This is called the perfecting of knowledge."<sup>40</sup>

Based upon the interpretations of chapter five, it was taken to mean the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge. This investigation was into the principles that underlie all phenomena, based upon careful observation and penetration. Investigation was taken to extend from the observation of the myriad things of existence, with their flux and harmony, leading one to inner sincerity, peace and harmony with the *tian*/heaven and Earth, thus forming the trinity. The precursors to Neo-Confucian thought, Han Yu and Li Ao, worked to reconnect Confucianism with the classics, and by so doing, re-establishing the social component implicit in this tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Investigation into principles meant the principles of proper social order as well as one's nature, *yin* and *yang* visible in natural events, and the material force (*qi / chi*) running through all things. Since humanity was an integral part of nature, investigation was into the roots of one's self and these forces operating within the individual, and one's social relationships. We find this fundamental component of Neo-Confucianism articulated clearly by Zheng Hao and his younger brother, Zheng Yi. In the works of the former we find: "The investigation of principle to the utmost, the full development of nature, and the fulfillment of destiny (*ming*, fate)—these three things are to be accomplished simultaneously. There is basically no time sequence among them. The investigation of principle to the utmost should be regarded merely as a matter of knowledge. If one really investigates principle to the utmost, even one's

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<sup>40</sup> These passages are translated and cited in W.T. Chan's work, pp. 88-89.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to note that one of the distinguishing characteristics of Confucian thought was its insistence upon "returning to the texts" for legitimization. We note that in the West, it was metaphysical assertions and claims that impelled speculative theosophers/philosophers to harken to ancient traditions and texts for "verification" of their veracity.

nature and destiny can be fulfilled."<sup>42</sup> Principle, since it is coursing through all things, can be approached in an external or internal manner. The younger brother comments thusly, "To learn them from what is outside, and grasp them within, is called 'understanding.' To grasp them from what is within, and connect them with outside things, is called 'integrity.' Integrity and understanding are one."<sup>43</sup> Graham comments on this, "Yi-ch'uan, followed by Chu Hsi and his school, lays stress on the objective approach, which Ming-tao, anticipating Lu Chiu-yuan (1139-1192) and Wang Shou-jen (1472-1528), prefers the subjective. But the two points of view are of course not incompatible, and the difference, which was to become the great controversial issue in Neo-Confucianism for the next five-hundred years, is only a difference of emphasis in the Ch'eng brothers."<sup>44</sup>

However, this difference of emphasis, this extraverted and introverted approach taken by these two brothers, forever alters the discourses and understandings of Li/Principle, *Tian*/Heaven and Humanity as portrayed and debated in Neo-Confucian thought. We see how easy it was to subsume *tian*/heaven under the primary concept of Principle (*li*), and to assert that the various names, as presented above are all different aspects of Principle. For the Zheng's (Ch'eng's) Principle became the primary referent, and the concept of Heaven was more "naturalized." Following this move, Lu Hsiang-Shan (Lu Xiang-shan) declared that "Principle is endowed in me by Heaven, not drilled into me... The mind is one and principle is one. Perfect truth is reduced to a unity; the essential principle is never a duality. The mind and principle can never be separated into two."<sup>45</sup> Here, to investigate things means to investigate mind, since mind is principle. Neo-Confucian thought was thenceforth divided over the concept of *tian*/heaven and Principle (*li*), without coming to a resolution or clear determination as to the nature of either. But, one consistency is that *tian*/heaven became equated with the Principle of Nature in its naturalistic guise. It does, however, remain a moral obligation to follow *tian*'s/heaven's decree and the investigation of things.

<sup>42</sup> W.T. Chan, *A Source in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 531.

<sup>43</sup> A.C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, p. 75.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> W.T. Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 574.

So far we have seen how the concept of *tian*/heaven served, in Chinese philosophy, a mediating role in human consciousness, with all of existence. By coming to learn the Mandate of Heaven, (*tianming*) society was to be ordered. In order to balance the needs of society, one must balance the other relationships of human life. In order to balance the relationships of life, one must live in balance with *tian*/heaven. In its initial guise, the Mandate was a relationship relegated to the King, but later became the Principle of Nature, and Nature's decrees, an inherent component of every person. It was the nobleman, the sage, that could best embody this Mandate and best understand the Principle. From its roots in pre-Confucian religious thought, the idea of *tian*/heaven has played a dominant role in all subsequent permutations of Confucianism. While the concept has fundamentally changed to a viewpoint that is more natural, the continuation of the belief in Heaven, Humanity and Earth forming a trinity remained consistent, and religious in orientation.

It seems a bit disingenuous not to mention that the discussion about *tian*/heaven being 'religious' and transcendent, is a modern Western-originated one. In the philosophical works of Chinese thinkers, we find no such debate. It is not until after the impact of Western thought, and Christianity, as presented to the Chinese in the late 1800's, that the debate of a 'religious' aspect to *tian*/heaven enters the literature.<sup>46</sup> Levenson asserts that "[I]t was left to the nineteenth century Christians, Western and Taiping, to dwell on the shadowy classical concept of *Shang-ti* as a transcendental supreme power. The traditional Confucian sancta were all bound up in *T'ien*, Heaven, whose 'mandate' (*ming*) made rulers legitimate and committed them to virtue (not power) to the end of harmony (not creative change). *T'ien* and *Shang-ti* had different origins."<sup>47</sup> He is not alone in this contention, and its mention serves to forewarn us to not exclude this consideration in our ponderings.

Likewise, the work by Hall and Ames, as indicated above, calls our attention to the assertion that *tian*/heaven was never a transcendent field of reference in Chinese thought. There was simply no conception of a separation that implied transcendence. *Tian*/Heaven was immanent in life

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<sup>46</sup> It is telling that we do not find such a change after the initial encounter with Christianity, under the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, who came to China in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>47</sup> J.R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, 1964, Book 2, p. 91.

and the heart. Indeed, it has been asserted by one Chinese scholar that "... whatever might be construed as transcendent in classical Chinese thought, it is not independent of the natural world, nor is it theistic. Far from entailing the dualism entailed by Western models of transcendence, classical China's world order, according to Mou, is altogether 'this worldly'."<sup>48</sup> The sage was concerned with actively transforming his inner character in order to transform the outer social structure and interactions. Thus, as we saw above, the sage is the representative of *tian*/heaven, and *is tian/heaven*. The Chinese view affords us an alternative and complement to the Western concept of transcendence that has dominated philosophical discourse and interpretive hermeneutics. It also affords us insight into the alternative meaning of religion that is under consideration.

It would appear that much of Confucian thought, both in its original and Neo-Confucian strain, utilized the concept of *tian*/heaven and the relationship with the individual and the collective, to contemplate man's place in the universe. While it retained its relationship in the formation of a trinity, the strong religious nature of *tian*/heaven was altered, without losing its moral prerogatives. If we contemplate the definitions of religion proffered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá given in the opening passages of this work, then it seems logical that a civilization and culture that based much of its philosophy upon the views of Kongzi, deriving from ancient Chinese heritage, would find religious fulfilment by determining the essential connections that emanate from the reality of things.

While there is no way to verify the thesis that China never was graced with a Manifestation, and while it is a central component of Bahá'í belief that humanity has always been guided by such Mediators, unless some empirical historical evidence is forthcoming, perhaps we may be better served in learning how it is that Chinese thought retained its essential connection to *tian*/heaven and the principles (*li*) emanating from the reality of all things. If we are enabled to understand this dimension of the Chinese psyche and thought, we may learn from Chinese thought how to conceive of Heaven, Earth and Humanity forming a trinity. And lest we pass over this casually, to conceive also means to "take to oneself" (thus

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<sup>48</sup> Cited in Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, 1998, p. 223.

its use as conception in a physical sense); so we conceive new ways of understanding by new ways of embodying and taking these conceptions as our own.

By so doing, we come to de-literalize the Western concept of Heaven, permit a fluid and unfixed definition, as well as learn to see religion in a manner that truly focuses on the "essential connections emanating from the reality of things." Then religion can be reconceived from being merely a set of rules that one is obligated to follow, imposed upon humanity from a Deity, to one that also acknowledges religion as a relationship which is inherent in the very structure of existence. In so doing, we are also enabled to overcome the strict transcendence that is the cultural heritage of Western theology that has created such a gulf between heaven and earth, spirit and nature, God and creation. Indeed, the Bahá'í corpus provides us with the means of conceiving this polar view, but this is not the place to develop this line of thought.<sup>49</sup>

It may serve us well if we now very briefly consider how it is that the Bahá'í Writings present the concept of Heaven, Nature and the Manifestation, and determine if there is a concordance of thought with these Chinese ideas. In fact, it is very apparent that in Bahá'í thought, "heaven" is a concept of immense import. We notice clear teachings indicating its metaphorical nature. In Bahá'u'lláh's work, *Kitáb-i-Íqán, The Book of Certitude*, He elucidates many of the meanings of heaven as used in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. We read, referring to the term heaven as used in these Holy Scriptures:

"In the utterances of the divine Luminaries the term 'heaven' hath been applied to many and divers things; such as the 'heaven of Command,' the 'heaven of Will,' the 'heaven of the divine Purpose,' the 'heaven of divine Knowledge,' the 'heaven of Certitude,' the 'heaven of Utterance,' the 'heaven of Revelation,' the 'heaven of Concealment,' and the like. In every instance, He hath given the term 'heaven' a special meaning, the

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<sup>49</sup> What this would entail is a consideration of the concept of the Manifestation as presented in the Bahá'í corpus, as well as a profound realization of a Both/And complementarity. The Writings present such a consideration by permitting us to contemplate the "distinction and unity" of the Manifestation. See Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 21. We are given to hold such disjuncts without conceiving therein essential opposition. Likewise, to hold a transcendent/ immanent disjunct without seeing these as opposites, moves us closer to grasping the polar terminology as used in Chinese thought.

significance of which is revealed to none save those that have been initiated into the divine mysteries, and have drunk from the chalice of immortal life."<sup>50</sup>

The process by which "heaven" became concretized into a "place" is beyond the scope of this article. However in the New Testament, we read that Christ ascended into heaven, and in the Qu'ran we read that Muhammad ascended to the seven heavens, and these were interpreted to refer to the physical sky, and spiritual places.<sup>51</sup> We find, contrary to these notions, that the Bahá'í corpus emphasizes the non-literal and non-physical meaning of these terms. When they do refer to a physicalist-sky concept, it is made clear. Commenting on the idea of the "seventh heaven", 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that:

"With regard to that which hath been mentioned concerning the seven spheres and the seven heavens referred to in the Books revealed by the Dawning-places of Light and Repositories of Secrets in previous ages, such references were dictated by the conventional wisdom prevailing in those times, for every cycle hath its own characteristics which are determined by the capacities of the people and their readiness to accept fresh revelations of the truth from behind the veil. All things are ordained by God according to a given measure. When the Prophets spoke of the celestial spheres what they intended was no more than the orbits of the planets falling within that greater world that embraces the sun and its attendant planetary system."<sup>52</sup>

The psychological tendency to concretise these spiritual concepts led many into assuming that heaven referred to the physical sky and that there were levels of heavens of a subtle nature, and that both Jesus and Muhammad physically ascended into the immensity of space. But it must be noted that "space" is a modern concept that replaced the notion of

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<sup>50</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)*, p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> For a fuller discussion of the concretisation of place in historical thought, see the author's work, *Re-Visioning, Re-Thinking, Re-Placing: From Neo-Platonism to Bahá'í in a Jung Way*, to be published in February 2001 by George Ronald Press.

<sup>52</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*, provisional translation, original in Makatib-i

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. 1, pp 13-32.

place in Western thought.<sup>53</sup> Thus, heaven was a place where souls of believers went after death, and where the true believers were rewarded with meeting the Cherubim and Seraphim as well as the other elect and Prophets. The Bahá'í concepts shatter this concretisation, persuading us that a new manner of envisioning "heaven" is needed.

Indeed, this new manner impels us to conceive of a relationship between heaven and humanity that is embodied. This embodiment is derived from the fact that "Earth and heaven cannot contain Me; what can alone contain Me is the heart of him that believeth in Me and is faithful to My Cause."<sup>54</sup> This immanent presence of the Divine in the human reality and consciousness enables us to realize that the connection between heaven and humanity, between the Prophet and humanity is closer than our life-vein.<sup>55</sup> The heart is the "seat of the All-Merciful and the throne wherein abideth the splendor of His revelation,"<sup>56</sup> and it is by cleansing the heart that knowledge of the Manifestation is attained. This conscious knowledge establishes a relationship with this Presence, and in so establishing a relationship, humanity recognizes its connection to the physical and spiritual cosmos.

In a manner similar to the re-visioning of the concept of heaven, the Bahá'í Writings present the idea of Nature in a way that also impels us to conceive a connection similar to that found in Chinese thought:

"Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion. It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp. Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendour of Our Name, the

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<sup>53</sup> For an excellent discussion of this, see E. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186. This reiterates a hadith attributed to Muhammad.

<sup>55</sup> This is an allusion to a poetic utterance mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh in *Gleanings*, p. 185.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

Creator. Say: This is an existence which knoweth no decay, and Nature itself is lost in bewilderment before its revelations, its compelling evidences and its effulgent glory which have encompassed the universe."<sup>57</sup>

While it is clear that the Chinese world-view does not include the concept of Names of God, nor the Will of God in a manner similar to that in the West, the notion of Principle (*li*) can be discerned to be a harmonious concept. Indeed, a man of discernment would observe the workings of the laws of nature and perceive these signs and principles underlying them. In fact, the *Yi Jing* uses the observations of the principles of nature discerned by humanity, codifies them into a symbolic system that has sustained Chinese speculative thought for centuries and still resonates deeply in the Chinese psyche. To present the concept of Nature in such a fashion, Bahá'u'lláh reveals passages that have profound reverberation in the human psyche, both in the East and West, and permits us to re-consider the connection inherent in the reality of all things.

It also provides us a framework with which to grasp the interconnection of all existence as well as imagine how it is that the reality of the Manifestation is conceived by Bahá'u'lláh to be "...transfigured before Him into a sovereign Potency permeating the essence of all things visible and invisible."<sup>58</sup> This potency, reflected in the human heart and Nature, provides the foundation of the harmony that exists between Humanity, Nature and Divinity.

In like manner, to re-conceive the concept of God, we note how the Bahá'í corpus presents ideas of profound import. Perhaps it would be better to assert that there is not a concept of God found in the Bahá'í Writings, but a concept of the Manifestation of God that dominates. In fact, we are informed clearly that any concept we may have, any Name or Attribute that humanity has attributed to God must be re-considered. 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, "Accordingly all these attributes, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation; and all that we imagine and suppose beside them is mere imagination, for we have no means of comprehending

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<sup>57</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Translated by H. Taherzadeh, 1978, p. 142.

<sup>58</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 102.

that which is invisible and inaccessible."<sup>59</sup> Likewise, He informs us that contingent reality can never conceive the non-contingent Reality, that Reality, that "Potency" mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh.

"Then how could it be possible for a contingent reality, that is, man, to understand the nature of that pre-existent Essence, the Divine Being? The difference in station between man and the Divine Reality is thousands upon thousands of times greater than the difference between vegetable and animal. And that which a human being would conjure up in his mind is but the fanciful image of his human condition, it doth not encompass God's reality but rather is encompassed by it. That is, man graspeth his own illusory conceptions, but the Reality of Divinity can never be grasped: It, Itself, encompasseth all created things, and all created things are in Its grasp. That Divinity which man doth imagine for himself existeth only in his mind, not in truth. Man, however, existeth both in his mind and in truth; thus man is greater than that fanciful reality which he is able to imagine."<sup>60</sup>

This assertion seriously challenges many of the concepts of God that humanity has held for centuries. It compels us to humble ourselves, accept the limitations of our concepts, and begin to envision in a manner that maintains the immanent connection between us and that Potency, while honouring fully the station of humanity as an embodied servant. Again, we discern how it is that the Bahá'í Writings present to us a concept of the harmony of humanity with existence.

Chinese thought pursued an understanding of this relationship by investigating the principles they observed in life processes and phenomena. Chinese philosophy, in its Confucian and Daoist manifestations, encouraged and inculcated the notion of embodying the principles of *tian*, in order to effectuate the fullness of being a human, which carried over into the social relationships, society and the kingdom. The West pursued an understanding by abstract metaphysical speculations. The Chinese way (*dao*), as articulated in Confucianism, was of embodiment; the Western way was of separation from nature and

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<sup>59</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 149.

<sup>60</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Translated by, G. Marzieh, 1978, p. 47.

transcendence. The Western philosophical ideal was founded upon rationalism, while Chinese ideal never forgot the body with its needs and implications.<sup>61</sup> Chinese thought never divided *tian* from Earth, *Yin* from *Yang*, positive from negative, etc. It saw all life as a unified and coherent whole, with polarities that were essential to existence. As the root of "whole" can be found in "holy" perhaps to contemplate within the temple of a unified holistic reality may permit us to grasp in greater depths of the essential connection emanating from the reality of things. By so doing, we can move beyond the secular/sacred, holy/unholy transcendent/immanent dichotomies of Western religious thought. As part of the trinity composed of Heaven, Earth and Humanity, we are an integral part of one whole, not isolated in reality, but only in our thoughts. We have but to understand that we form an integral part of existence, a connection that is essential to its operations, at least *for us*. Chinese religious and philosophical thought enables us to begin an approach to this essential connection we serve. The Way of Heaven and the Way of Humanity coincide. It is our misunderstandings that divide.

When Westerners or religious adherents approach Chinese philosophy, and when contemporary Chinese do likewise, it may behove us to examine closely the notion of transcendence in Chinese thought, and *our* field of reference for this idea. While we can never get behind these views as held by early philosophers, we are well served by considering whether or not the Western notion of transcendence is applicable to Chinese philosophy. We may ask ourselves: "Why should it be?" If the thrust of Chinese thought is embodiment, in order to perpetuate the harmony that was believed to exist between *tian* and humanity and the earth, surely the immanent dimension of *tian* should be considered. We must move beyond our Western constructed and influenced categories in our interpretive hermeneutics of Chinese thought. Akin to the notion that light is a wave and a particle, and ultimately is electromagnetism, to hold that there can be a transcendence in polar union with an immanence effectually enables us to conceive new manners of thinking. As we conceive, new ways are born.

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<sup>61</sup> For a wonderful work that presents this idea clearly, see Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*.

Religion, as the "necessary connection" seems to have imbedded in it an immanent component. By hesitating to translate *tian* as H/heaven, we may be enabled also to learn how it is that Chinese philosophers conceived of existence as an integrated whole with polar dimensions that are integral to the human experience. We may also learn how to conceive without fixed categories and terms, akin to how the Bahá'í corpus present the notions of heaven and religion, and how quantum physics presents current understandings of "matter." For philosophical works, especially as developed in the West, specificity of terms is essential. Aristotle spent many works coming up with clearly demarcated definitions and this set the precedence. We see no such specificity in Chinese thought. Pluralism, as a philosophical view, as well as a pluralistic manner of perceiving, is not new. This is exactly what quantum physicists hold in their approaches: matter is and is not solid. It is our frame of reference that, in part, determines what we observe. *Tian* is and is not transcendent; is and is not "heaven"; it is much more than this. In this way, and by extension, in considering other terms that have been given decidedly Western interpretive frameworks, we may learn more of what is implied in the Bahá'í Writings when Bahá'u'lláh informs us that "[T]he highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written hath, through this most potent Revelation, been sent down from the heaven of the Will of the All-Possessing, the Ever-Abiding God."<sup>62</sup> Likewise, we note a clear principle proffered: "He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."<sup>63</sup> Likewise, "... the classical Chinese commentators focus their interest in *how* a living term discloses its meaning within its various contexts, rather than assuming that terms have some univocal, essential meaning independent of how they are used."<sup>64</sup> Westerners, seeking to understand philosophical *or* religious texts are inclined to literalize and concretise these terms. Perhaps we can learn not to, thus not to ossify these dynamic systems.

The resonance we notice within the language of the Bahá'í corpus and Chinese thought may enable humanity to learn a new manner of envisioning the full complexity of our existence. We are transcendent and

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<sup>62</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 95.

<sup>63</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255. Here He cites a tradition of Islam.

<sup>64</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, 1998, p. 142.

immanent; the Manifestation is the immanent Representative of a transcendent "Energy" we have learned to call "God".<sup>65</sup> The focus in the West on transcendence to the exclusion of immanence, except the mystical doctrines that served to counterbalance this tendency, has served to fragment our views from nature, society, self-in-relation, and ultimately, from our self.

These considerations, it is herein proposed, may provide us with views as to how China could develop as it did without records of an identifiable Manifestation. By suspending traditional interpretive notions and terms, we may be enabled to envision manners of approaching existence, approaching an understanding of Chinese thought as well as the Bahá'í Religion that are in harmony with "heaven".

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<sup>65</sup> For a consideration of how the Bahá'í Writings use the terms "energy" and "force" the reader is encouraged to turn to them to investigate.

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