

Lao-tze, founder of Taoism, a transcendental and unpractical mystic religion, with renunciation for its standard of duty and absorption in Tao or "God the Absolute" for its reward. The revered recluse had already heard of Confucius's rising fame, and was pleased to see him and expound his faith to him personally. On his part, Confucius said, "I come to listen with all the respect due to age and great experience . . . But on no account to contradict." After the interview "it is said that Confucius refused for three days to give any opinion upon the good old sage's eloquently stated views, and, at last, explained that 'he had simply listened with helpless gaze and open-mouthed wonder; amazed that so learned and experienced an old man should thus base the hopes of the race, and the conduct of mankind on phantoms and mere speculative ideas.'" The absorption in Tao or "God the Absolute," he described as "a flight into boundless space."

In short, Confucius's own attitude was that of "plain, solid and practical agnosticism," surprisingly modern European in tone. "When we are not cognizant of the facts and fully assured thereof, let us be silent and tell the busy multitudes not to waste their substance, abilities, and time, on what is very doubtful and dark, but to study Nature's Laws and Order, which are clear, divine and universal, and live in accordance therewith." "We must all give ourselves up earnestly to the duties due to our fellows, and respect their religious customs and spiritual leanings; but let us keep ourselves apart from these last, and curb rather than encourage speculative or pious theories concerning gods and spirits, good and bad, and the origin and end of all things." He humbly thought he was "part of a stupendous mechanism not given to man to understand," but which might indefinitely be called Ti-en, the Heavens or Sky-Power, and all that it enshrouded or mayhap governed.

This seed of "cold unemotional agnosticism" was sown successfully among a race, whom our author thus describes: "Like ourselves, they diligently in private and public practised ancient and well-defined rites and ceremonies, which comforted them in troubles and sorrows; rites and duties which their pious ancestors had severely enjoined, and which had an assured commercial value to themselves, their priests, and all purveyors of temple and funereal services." His statesmanlike instinct preferred not directly to attack and attempt the overthrow of this complex condition of affairs. "His life and work is a proof that to permanently and successfully move a people we must study their idiosyncracies, and move along with the current of their thoughts and feelings, and so guide the stream gently into such new channels as are capable of containing it." Thus he would not reject such phrases as "The gods revealing themselves to us," or "Divine inspiration," but he would explain them away as terms for certain of our own feelings. And he "occasionally speaks with deference of the all-prevailing beliefs in deities and divination." And thus he writes of sacrifices, etc.: "The dominant idea of sacrifices to heaven and earth is that they set forth