

# Is Taoism a religion or a philosophy? is Tai Chi compatible with Christianity?

## Abstract

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) to examine a philosophical and a religious question. Microsoft Copilot was the chat bot selected to assist in the study. The two main goals of the present study were to determine whether Taoism is a religion or a philosophy, and to determine whether tai chi is compatible with Christianity. Both of those goals were achieved. Taoism has aspects of both philosophy and religion. Thus, it can be both, although it is not necessarily both. Both theists and atheists can be Taoists. Tai chi is compatible with Christianity, and the practice of tai chi can actually enhance the practice and experience of the Christian faith.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, ai, taoism, daoism, religion, christianity, philosophy, tai chi, qigong

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## Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly popular in recent years as a means for both professionals and hobbyists to explore a number of issues in the social sciences, the hard sciences, medicine, business and other disciplines.<sup>1-58</sup> Numerous chat bots have become available online that are being used as tools for asking a wide range of questions about practically any subject under the sun. Although AI has become a valuable tool for research, it has not yet evolved to the point where it can be totally trusted to deliver truth. Studies have shown that it can provide incorrect information<sup>45-49</sup> and that it can be politically biased,<sup>50-58</sup> resulting in the reality that any information AI spews forth must be examined for accuracy and objectivity. However, AI can be a useful first step for a wide range of research because it can find useful information in a timely manner. It can enhance the quality of the final product and can save hours of time, thus making research more efficient.

The issue explored in the current study attempts to answer the question of whether Taoism (Daoism) is a religion, a philosophy or both. Although exploring this question constitutes a good intellectual exercise, its answer has practical implications. The impetus for writing this essay was a conversation I had with some fundamentalist Christians on the topic of whether studying and practicing tai chi would be acceptable for a Christian, since the philosophical aspects of tai chi overlap somewhat with Taoism. As a result of this conversation, I read two short books on Taoism<sup>59,60</sup> in an attempt to resolve this issue in my own mind, as well as to convey the information I found to those fundamentalist Christians. My tentative conclusion was that Taoism does not conflict with Christianity, and that tai chi may be studied and practiced safely by fundamentalist Christians because there is no conflict between the two. I might also add that it is quite possible to teach tai chi from a totally secular perspective, since it is a set of physical exercises that have a strong philosophical underpinning. It is not necessary to become familiar with the philosophical underpinnings of tai chi in order to reap its benefits, and even if the tai chi philosophy is part of the instruction, one can discuss the philosophical aspects of tai chi without getting into a discussion of religion.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that none of my degrees are in religion, although one of my PhDs is in philosophy. Thus, I am not an expert on the topic of religion to the extent that

someone with years of religious study would be. Anything contained in this essay is subject to challenge. In fact, I hereby invite both religious and philosophical scholars to discuss the contents and conclusions reached in this essay, partly for selfish reasons. The comments these scholars make would advance my own understanding of the issue without the need for me to do any further research on my part. Thus, one reason for inviting other scholars to comment and critique this essay is due to my own philosophical and intellectual laziness. Like everyone else, I must allocate my time in the most efficient manner possible. Delving deeper into this topic would take time away from other things I would like to do.

## Methodology

Microsoft Copilot<sup>61</sup> is the chat bot I have chosen to explore this issue because it is one of the more popular chatbots being used by both amateurs and professionals as of this writing. It is not a perfect chatbot. It has some political biases that I have found in prior studies<sup>50-58</sup> and I have found it to provide inaccurate information at times.<sup>45-49</sup>

## The study

Taoism, also called Daoism, originated in China around the fourth or fifth century BCE. Wikipedia<sup>62</sup> refers to it as both a religion and a philosophy. Some Taoist sects have clergy, and some branches of Taoism mention “immortals,” which might be interpreted to be gods by some people. There is also somewhat of an overlap between Taoism and Buddhism, which is both a philosophy and religion. Thus, it appears that at least some sects or branches of Taoism (there are many) can be considered as religious in nature, although the two books I read on Taoism did not seem to indicate that Taoism is a religion. In this study I will ask Copilot a few questions and will give it instructions to write a few paragraphs that explore certain issues relating to the question of whether Taoism is a religion.

### A. Instruction

Write an essay on the origin and main ideas of Taoism. Provide references in APA format.

### Copilot

Origin and Main Ideas of Taoism

## Introduction

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is an ancient Chinese philosophical and religious tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao (Dao), which means “the Way.” Taoism’s origins can be traced back to the 6th century BCE, and it has profoundly influenced Chinese culture, philosophy, and spiritual practices. This essay explores the origins of Taoism, its main ideas, and its impact on Chinese society.

## Origins of taoism

The foundational texts of Taoism are attributed to two central figures: Laozi (**Lao Tzu**) and Zhuangzi (**Chuang Tzu**). Laozi is traditionally credited with writing the *Tao Te Ching* (**Dao De Jing**), a compact and cryptic text that outlines the core principles of Taoism. Although Laozi’s historical existence is debated, the *Tao Te Ching* remains one of the most influential texts in Chinese philosophy. Zhuangzi, another pivotal figure, wrote the *Zhuangzi* (**Chuang Tzu**), a collection of stories and philosophical musings that expand on the ideas presented in the *Tao Te Ching*. These works collectively lay the foundation for Taoist thought, emphasizing themes such as naturalness, simplicity, and spontaneity.

## Main ideas of taoism

- 1) The tao (Dao):** The central concept of Taoism, the Tao, is often described as the ultimate reality or the fundamental nature of the universe. It is an ineffable and indescribable force that underlies all existence. The Tao is the source of all things and the principle that governs the natural order.
- 2) Wu wei (Non-action):** Wu Wei is a core principle in Taoism that can be translated as “non-action” or “effortless action.” It advocates for a way of living that is in harmony with the Tao, where actions are spontaneous and in accordance with the natural flow of the universe. Instead of forcing or striving, one should act in a way that is effortless and uncontrived.
- 3) Naturalness and simplicity:** Taoism emphasizes living in accordance with the natural world and embracing simplicity. It encourages individuals to shed artificial constructs and return to a state of authenticity and harmony with nature. This involves valuing humility, modesty, and contentment with a simple life.
- 4) Relativity and paradox:** Taoist philosophy often explores the relativity of concepts and the paradoxical nature of existence. It challenges rigid distinctions between opposites, such as good and bad or life and death, suggesting that these are interconnected and interdependent. This perspective encourages a holistic view of the world.
- 5) Immortality and alchemy:** In addition to its philosophical teachings, Taoism has a rich tradition of practices aimed at achieving physical and spiritual immortality. These practices include meditation, breathing exercises, and alchemy. Taoist alchemists sought to transform the body and spirit, believing that immortality could be attained through inner cultivation and harmony with the Tao.

## Impact on Chinese society

Taoism has significantly influenced Chinese culture, art, medicine, and political thought. Its emphasis on harmony with nature has shaped Chinese landscape painting and poetry, while its holistic approach to health has contributed to traditional Chinese medicine. Taoist

principles have also impacted governance, promoting the idea of leading by example and ruling with minimal intervention.

## Conclusion

Taoism, with its origins in the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, offers profound insights into the nature of existence and the path to harmonious living. Its core ideas of the Tao, Wu Wei, naturalness, and relativity provide a framework for understanding the world and one’s place within it. As a philosophical and spiritual tradition, Taoism continues to inspire and guide individuals seeking a deeper connection with the natural world and a more authentic way of life.

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## Author comments

Wikipedia<sup>62</sup> stated that Taoism originated in the fourth or fifth century BCE, whereas Copilot said it originated in the sixth century BCE. Religious scholars probably know when it originated, or perhaps nobody knows. Maybe there is widespread agreement on this point. Maybe not. The date of its origin might be subject to some debate, but we will not do that in this essay. According to Copilot, Taoist thought originated with two Chinese philosophers, but it also stated that Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophical and religious tradition. Thus, the argument could be made that Taoism is also a religion, or at least that its tenets have some religious flavor to them. Some of Taoism’s main themes emphasize naturalness, simplicity and spontaneity, none of which are religious per se. These themes could be adopted by atheists and agnostics as well as adherents of practically any religion. The *Tao Te Ching* and Zhuangzi’s short stories seem to be philosophical in nature rather than religious.

If the central concept of Taoism is a discussion or exploration of ultimate reality or the nature of the universe, one might reasonably conclude that it explores the same issues as physics to a certain extent. In fact, this connection has been explored in the literature by at least one book I have purchased but have not yet taken the time to read<sup>63</sup>. I really must put that on my list of things to do. The book was written by a scholar who has a PhD in theoretical physics and who apparently also has a background in several Asian religions and philosophies. I asked Copilot to provide references for several reasons. For one, listing its sources provides an opportunity to check for the accuracy of the statements in its essay. I specifically asked it to provide references in APA format because the references it gave in some of my prior AI studies were given in several different formats and were incomplete or even inaccurate in some cases.

## B. Instruction

Can Taoism be considered a religion, or is it just a philosophy? What determines whether a set of beliefs constitutes a religion or a philosophy? Write an essay on this topic and provide references in APA format.

## Copilot

Taoism: religion or philosophy?

### Introduction

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is a multifaceted tradition that encompasses elements of both philosophy and religion. This essay examines whether Taoism can be considered a religion, a philosophy, or both. Additionally, it explores the criteria that determine whether a set of beliefs constitutes a religion or a philosophy.

### Taoism as a philosophy

Taoism has its roots in ancient Chinese philosophy, with foundational texts such as the *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi and the *Zhuangzi* by Zhuangzi. These texts emphasize understanding and living in harmony with the Tao (the Way), a fundamental principle that represents the natural order of the universe. Philosophically, Taoism promotes key ideas such as Wu Wei (non-action), naturalness, and simplicity. Wu Wei advocates for effortless action in alignment with the natural flow of life. The philosophical teachings of Taoism focus on achieving inner peace, wisdom, and balance by following the Tao. As a philosophy, Taoism provides guidance on ethical living, personal development, and understanding the world. It does not necessarily require belief in deities or engage in religious rituals, making it accessible as a way of thinking and living rather than a structured belief system.

### Taoism as a religion

Taoism also functions as a religion, with organized practices, rituals, and a clergy. Religious Taoism developed over centuries, incorporating elements of Chinese folk religion, alchemy, and spiritual practices aimed at achieving immortality and spiritual enlightenment. Religious Taoism includes worship of a pantheon of gods, ancestral veneration, and rituals conducted by Taoist priests. Temples, festivals, and ceremonies play a central role in community life, providing spiritual guidance and promoting well-being among adherents. The religious aspect of Taoism emphasizes practices such as meditation, ritual offerings, and Qigong (energy cultivation exercises). It aims to foster a connection between the individual and the divine, promoting spiritual growth and harmony with the universe.

### Criteria for defining religion and philosophy

Determining whether a set of beliefs constitutes a religion or a philosophy involves examining key criteria:

- 1) **Belief system:** Religions typically involve belief in supernatural entities, deities, or divine principles. Philosophies focus more on ethical, logical, and metaphysical concepts without necessarily invoking the supernatural.
- 2) **Ritual practices:** Religions often include formal rituals, worship, and ceremonies. Philosophies may suggest practices for ethical living or personal improvement but lack formalized rituals.
- 3) **Community and organization:** Religions tend to have organized communities, clergy, and institutions that provide structure and support to adherents. Philosophies, while they can foster communities, are often more individualized and less structured.
- 4) **Purpose and function:** Religions aim to provide spiritual guidance, meaning, and a sense of connection to the divine or the universe. Philosophies seek to explain the nature of reality, provide ethical guidelines, and promote intellectual understanding.

## Conclusion

Taoism encompasses elements of both philosophy and religion, making it a unique tradition that defies simple categorization. As a philosophy, it offers profound insights into ethical living and understanding the natural world. As a religion, it provides spiritual practices, rituals, and a sense of community. Ultimately, whether Taoism is viewed as a philosophy or a religion depends on the perspective and focus of the individual practitioner.

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## Author comments

One thing I noticed about chatbots in general and Copilot in particular is its/their ability to write good essays. The text flows smoothly and logically, much differently than many undergraduate college essays. This ability presents problems and challenges to college professors who assign essays to their classes because it is not always possible to determine whether the student wrote the essay or whether AI wrote it. Software has been developed that tests the percentage of a document that was generated by AI, but the software that has been developed as of this writing does an imperfect job of identifying AI content.

The Copilot essay identified Taoism as a tradition that includes elements of both religion and philosophy. Its ancient roots are based in Chinese philosophy, but it does not necessarily require a belief in deities, and one need not engage in religious rituals to be a Taoist. Thus, it is compatible with both atheism and religion, or at least some religions. On the other hand, one may believe in one or more deities and might practice religious rituals while also subscribing to Taoist philosophy without conflict. Those who practice a religion that includes human sacrifice or other acts that conflict with the natural order of things would not be able to subscribe to Taoist philosophy without inner conflict. Thus, Taoism is compatible with some religions, but not all religions. Taoism may be divided into two main subcategories, religious Taoism and nonreligious Taoism. If one believes in supernatural entities, deities or divine principles while also practicing the principles of Taoism, then one is a religious Taoist. If one practices religious rituals or participates in religious ceremonies while subscribing to the Taoist philosophy, then one is a religious Taoist.

Both religion and philosophy attempt to explain the nature of reality. Both religion and philosophy provide a list of principles to live by. The Copilot essay concludes that Taoism encompasses elements of both religion and philosophy. Thus, Taoism can be both a religion and a philosophy, but it need not be both because atheists can subscribe to the principles of Taoism without worshipping deities or having religious rituals or ceremonies. Individuals of many religious persuasions can subscribe to the principles of Taoism without violating their religious principles, depending on what those religious principles might be.

## C. Instruction

Write an essay on the origin and main ideas of tai chi. Is tai chi compatible with Christianity? Provide references in APA format.

## COPILOT

The Origin and Main Ideas of Tai Chi

### Introduction

Tai Chi, also known as Taijiquan, is an ancient Chinese martial art that has evolved into a practice focused on physical and mental well-being. This essay explores the origins of Tai Chi, its main ideas, and its compatibility with Christianity.

### Origin of tai chi

Tai Chi originated in China over 400 years ago.<sup>64</sup> The practice is often attributed to the legendary Taoist monk Zhang Sanfeng, who is said to have developed Tai Chi during the 12th century.<sup>65</sup> However, the exact origins are unclear, and Tai Chi may have evolved from earlier martial arts practices.<sup>65</sup> The name “Tai Chi” translates to “supreme ultimate fist,” reflecting its roots in Chinese philosophy and cosmology.<sup>65</sup>

### Main ideas of tai chi

- 1) Yin and Yang:** Tai Chi is based on the principles of Yin and Yang, which represent opposing yet complementary forces.<sup>66</sup> The practice aims to balance these forces within the body and the universe.<sup>66</sup>
- 2) Qi (Vital energy):** Tai Chi focuses on cultivating and balancing Qi, the vital energy that flows through the body.<sup>66</sup> Through slow, deliberate movements and deep breathing, practitioners aim to enhance their Qi and promote overall health.<sup>66</sup>
- 3) Wu Wei (Non-action):** Similar to Taoist philosophy, Tai Chi emphasizes Wu Wei, or effortless action.<sup>67</sup> This principle encourages practitioners to move in a natural, relaxed manner, without forcing or straining.<sup>67</sup>
- 4) Mind-body connection:** Tai Chi promotes a strong mind-body connection, encouraging practitioners to be mindful of their movements and breath.<sup>68</sup> This focus on mindfulness can lead to improved mental clarity and emotional well-being.<sup>68</sup>
- 5) Health benefits:** Tai Chi is known for its numerous health benefits, including improved balance, flexibility, and stress reduction.<sup>68</sup> It is often recommended for older adults and those seeking a gentle form of exercise.<sup>68</sup>

### Compatibility with Christianity

The compatibility of Tai Chi with Christianity is a topic of debate among believers.<sup>68</sup> Some Christians view Tai Chi as a form of exercise and meditation that can enhance their spiritual life.<sup>68</sup> The slow, deliberate movements and focus on mindfulness can help Christians cultivate a sense of peace and presence, which can deepen their connection with God.<sup>68</sup> However, others caution that Tai Chi's roots in Eastern philosophy and religion may conflict with Christian beliefs.<sup>68</sup> While Tai Chi itself is not inherently religious, its association with Taoist and Buddhist practices may raise concerns for some Christians.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, the decision to practice Tai Chi as a Christian is a personal one.<sup>68</sup> It is important to prayerfully consider how Tai Chi aligns with one's own beliefs and values.<sup>68</sup> Many Christians have found that incorporating Tai Chi into their routine can improve their physical and mental health without compromising their faith.<sup>68</sup>

### Conclusion

Tai Chi is a rich tradition that combines physical exercise, meditation, and philosophical principles.<sup>65</sup> Its origins in Chinese

philosophy and its focus on balance and well-being make it a valuable practice for many. While its compatibility with Christianity may vary, Tai Chi can be a beneficial addition to a Christian's lifestyle when practiced mindfully and with respect for one's faith.

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### Author comments

Again, the AI-generated essay did a good job of organizing and summarizing the topic. However, I noticed at least one mistake, although a minor one. The essay stated that “Tai Chi” means “supreme ultimate fist,” which is not quite correct. “Tai Chi” means “supreme ultimate.” “Tai Chi Chuan” means “supreme ultimate fist.” Not a big deal, but an inaccuracy, nonetheless.

A cursory reading of the five sources cited<sup>64-68</sup> found them to be very good. I suggest reading them if you would like to learn more about tai chi, its origin and history. One of the essays cited<sup>65</sup> gave only a partial history of tai chi. Part 2 of that article was not cited, but it is available online.<sup>69</sup> The essay *Should a Christian Do Tai Chi*<sup>68</sup> should be read by any Christian who has a question about whether tai chi is compatible with Christianity. Basically, the essay approved of tai chi as being compatible with Christianity. It stated that the practice of tai chi can actually enhance their faith by “allowing for a deeper connection with God.” Another article<sup>70</sup> said basically the same thing.

### Concluding comments

This study used artificial intelligence (AI) to examine a philosophical and a religious question. AI performed well. The essays it wrote were well organized, well written and almost entirely accurate. The two main goals of the present study were to determine whether Taoism is a religion or a philosophy, and to determine whether tai chi is compatible with Christianity. Both of those goals were achieved. Taoism has aspects of both philosophy and religion. Thus, it can be both, although it is not necessarily both. Both theists and atheists can be Taoists. Tai chi is compatible with Christianity, and the practice of tai chi can actually enhance the practice and experience of the Christian faith.

### Acknowledgments

None.

### Conflicts of interest

There is no conflicts of interest.

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