THE ISMAILI MUSLIM IDENTITY AND CHANGING CONTEXTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Shia Ismaili Muslims constitute one of the branches of Islam and represent a minority within the Muslim *Ummah*. They are found at present in some 25 different countries of the world, primarily in western Asia (including India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria), Central Asia including the Soviet Union, China in the Northern Himalayan areas of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, Eastern Africa and now increasingly in the western world, primarily in Great Britain, Canada and the United States.[1]

The purpose of my paper is to explore within the changing contexts of the last 150 years, the interaction between identity and change in the Ismaili community, with a focus on those members of the community whose roots were in the Subcontinent, who subsequently migrated to East Africa and then in the last quarter of a century, have begun to make their home in the West. For comparative purposes I also wish to give as an example the situation of Central Asian Ismailis in the Northern areas of Pakistan. My method will be to treat the various transitions that mark modern Ismaili history and to relate these to the way in which the Ismaili identity has been defined and itself defines the type of institutional, religious and ritual change that has enabled Ismailis to maintain their religious identity in changing contexts.[2]

My starting point is the definition of the initial boundaries that circumscribe the Ismaili community during its first significant phase of change in the middle of the 19th Century and the subsequent redefinition and extension of these boundaries.

ISMAILIS OF THE INDO-PAKISTAN SUBCONTINENT

In the mid-nineteenth century groups of the Indian Ismaili community were to be found in Sind, Gujarat, Punjab and other centres in northern and western British-ruled India. The migration of the *Imam* of the time, Hasan Ali Shah (Aga Khan I) from Iran to India, and the eventual establishment of his headquarters in Bombay in 1848, created the initial context for changes in the community's future organization and development.

The Aga Khan and his successors, Aga Khan II (d. 1885) and the well-known international figure Aga Khan III (d. 1957), adopted in subsequent years a program of reorganization and modernization of the community's structure which sought to establish continuity with past tradition even while creating connections with institutions and patterns of economic life under the British.

Since the present Imam, Shah Karim, Aga Khan IV, assumed the position of Iman in 1957, there have been many fundamental political and economic changes that have affected Ismailis all over the world. Under his leadership, the programs initiated in previous years have been consolidated and additional steps taken to meet new community as well as national requirements, primarily in the Third World.

Overall, the strategy adopted by the Imams for effecting change in the community was to introduce modern administrative and educational institutions into the community and to relate these changes to an interpretation of the role of Ismaili Islam as a transforming agent. The key to this process was the mobilization and reorientation of traditional values. If, as it is generally maintained among Ismailis, their transition to modernity has been a successful synthesis of religious continuity and adaptive capability, then it is to their traditional insititutions and values that one must look for clues as to how they perceive this to have been achieved.

In addition to the affirmation of its religious values, the Ismailis have also been concerned in the present global situation of Muslims, to build bridges with other Muslims and non-Muslim communities. As articulated by their present Imam, his main objectives have been to:

> ... help the Community adjust to increasingly rapid forces of modernization and what I would call threats of extreme secularisation, the imbalances which one notes in certain parts of the world caused by the unequivocal search for material wealth, which passes the limits of reason. I think that was a problem; not of one time but a continuing problem. A delicate balance had to be found between living in the Twentieth Century, with all that means in terms of technological knowledge, of aspirations for material well-being and, at the same time, the actual turning into practice of the spirit of the Muslim brotherhood, the practice of one's faith and the concern for the betterment of the people. That was one issue which I sought to deal with. The second issue was the adjustment of the Community to new economic and political situations and that, of course, must also remain a continuing problem. There is no doubt that the situation in Africa between 1957 and 1983 has changed very radically, the situation in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent has changed, the situation in the Middle East has changed very rapidly, new communities have established themselves in the Western World and adjustments to these new political and economic realities have been of major concern to me. A third area has been to build upon the institutional structure which my grandfather had created so that the members of the Community and others would use these institutions which were not only responding to the existing problems but were sufficiently well managed to anticipate future requirements and to grow in such a way that they became strong pillars of support for the Community in fields of education, health, housing and economic development. Another element which has been of concern to me, has been to try to build bridges amongst the various 'Tareeqas' in Islam. I have felt that Islam must not be exposd to increasing polarisation and division — after all the consequence would only breed weakness. I have encouraged my Community and, through my own actions, tried to build unity. ...[3]

The implementation of these goals and the enlargement of boundaries, also incorporated adjustments in the practice of the faith that had developed and became ingrained in the community over the period of its history and development in India. Some of these had been retained with the tradition as part of the process of conversion from Hinduism to Islam in previous centuries. Examples of these were Indian or Hindu customs of inheritance, marriage, etc. These were discouraged and a stronger affirmation of Ismaili Shiite tradition came to be integrated in the personal and family law. Certain ritual practices were retained and modified and even acted as agents of change in the movement towards greater self-identification with modern Ismaili Islam.

This process of change was extended and given wider application in the social context, as well. As an example, the Imam also encouraged women to participate actively

in the public performance of prayers. When studying the community in a comparative context, one finds the role of women in ritual practice more pronounced among Ismailis of Indo-Pakistani origin than perhaps among other Muslim groups; the wider role envisaged for women by the Imams was facilitated and prepared for in part by their growing role in the religious life of the community. Certain rituals thus played a crucial role as agents of social change and were linked to the overall policy of the community in encouraging education among girls and indeed in creating a stronger role for them in the modernized institutions of the community. When viewed diachronically, Indian Ismaili rituals may be very useful tools for analyzing in more detailed fashion how patterns of belief and community organization are interdependent, and may provide significant clues to how a religious community adapts its symbols and concepts in new or changed situations.

As is well known, the Ismailis, like other Shia in general, have evolved through Muslim history their own framework for implementing the *Shariah*. The above process indicates a reestablishment of the fundamental practices with reference to that historical framework and a realignment of practices that were congruent with past practice as well as the normative Ismaili traditions among its communities in other parts of the world such as Syria, Iran, Central Asia and East Africa. These communities were also going through similar periods of transition, albeit at a differing pace and within varying historical circumstances.

An example of one such community, is that of Ismailis of Central Asian origin who today live in what are known as the Northern Areas of Pakistan.

ISMAILIS OF THE NORTHERN AREAS OF PAKISTAN

These Central Asian Ismailis are located in probably what is among the most spectacular geographical settings in the world, where three great mountain ranges of Central Asia—the Himalayas, the Karakorums, and the Hindu Kush converge. Several major peaks such as the K-2, the Nanga Parbat, and the Rakaposhi, all rise majestically within this setting. The River Indus flows through the region carving out valleys that make human settlement possible.

It is in this setting in Central Asia and more particularly in Gilgit, Hunza, and Chitral, now part of the Northern Area of Pakistan, that one finds the presence of Nizari Ismailis of Central Asian origin. It must be noted that Pakistan and India are also home to the ancestors of those Ismailis already referred to in North America.

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF HISTORY

The early history of this region has yet to be written. There has been no systematic collection of the oral tradition that constitutes by far the most significant source. What has been recorded by political agents, travellers and now local historians is sketchy and vague, and refers mostly to legends that range from tracing the origin of people of the area to remnants of Alexander's soldiers or to Indo-Scythian tribes who came up the Indus Valley and settled there. The languages spoken in the area and reflecting the oral culture of pre-modern times, Burushaski in Hunza, Khowar in Chitral, and Shina in Gilgit are considered Dardic or Kafiric languages bearing little resemblance to either Indian, Iranian, or Turkish language patterns. Current studies on these languages by French-Canadian scholars, and archeological and ethnographic studies initiated by professor Karl Jettmar of Heidelberg University, will, one hopes, throw some light on their origins and relationship to other Central Asian languages and cultures.

One thing is certain: The physical barriers and remoteness of the region helped sustain the autonomy both of language and culture. Buddhist artifacts, as in Afghanistan, are found in the area, indicating the presence of some form of Buddhism, but this may have been the result of contact in China, that constituted for a long time the major point of contact with this area. There were three trading routes that allowed for trade between Central and South Asia through this region. Raiding of caravans was therefore an important aspect of the economic life of the region.

In the nineteenth century, this area became a part of the struggle for Central Asia that pitted Britain against Russia. Hunza's strategic importance, lying as it did on the direct line of Russian advance to the Subcontinent, caused the British to divert the caravan route away from the Hunza Pass, causing the people to change their tactics and raid the alternative route. It is said that as a result the British decided to move against the area and in 1891 captured it and integrated it into the Indian Empire, putting it under the control of Kashmir. In 1935 a separate Gilgit Agency was set up to oversee the area; and in 1947 the partition of British India led to a dispute over the whole Kashmir region. After the ceasefire in 1948, the area came under Pakistani control and was managed until the 1970s as a special territory, with a degree of local autonomy granted to the ruler known as *Mir* and then finally designated and integrated as part of the Northern Areas of Pakistan.

It is not known when conversion to Islam took place. Tradition has it that a *pir* introduced Islam in the area during the medieval period and that he converted its people to Shiism. It has also been suggested that the adoption of Ismailism in some areas may be no more than five generations old. Prior to that they are believed to have been Ithna Ashari. Until the oral tradition and other historical materials have been fully analyzed and evaluated, we remain in the dark about the introduction of Islam and Ismailism to this area.

CHANGING CONTEXTS

The last decade or so has witnessed major changes for the people of the region. By way of contrast with other Ismaili communities, I want to examine three significant contextual changes that have affected the Ismailis here.

The first context is broadly political and involves the integration of the Northern Areas into the political framework of what remained of Pakistan after the emergence of Bangla Desh in 1971. As part of this integration, the area was also drawn into the larger context of the development process affecting Pakistan. The autonomous control in local matters exercised by the Mir in Hunza or the Political Agents in Gilgit or the Special Administration of these "disputed" territories was now replaced by centralized government institutions.

A second major change was effected by the building of the Karakorum Highway, a 600-mile metalled dual highway that winds its way through the mountains and links the capital of Islamabad to the Northern Areas, up to the Kunjerab Pass bordering on China. The KKH, as it is known, was officially opened in 1978.

This has had tremendous economic implications for the area; Gilgit has become a major trading center and the primarily subsistence agricultural life of the Northern Areas is being complemented by other commercial activity, including the mining of precious minerals.

The third, and for our purposes most significant change, is in the widening of their sense of religious identity. The integration of the Nizari Ismailis of the area into the national, i.e., Pakistani, and global development policies of the present Imam has led to major institutional and administrative change. The focus of change has

been community initiative, engendered by guidance from the Imam and channeled through new and appropriate institutions that blend private, national, and international resources, and intended to benefit not only Ismailis, but to a great extent all those who live in the area.

In the case of the Northern Areas, this has meant the creation of Councils and other administrative structures similar to those among other Ismailis. This process had been initiated by the previous Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah; but in time the institutions have involved much larger segments of the community, so that at present there are local Ismaili councils in each of the four main regions of the Northern Areas—Hunza, Gilgit, Chitzar, and Chitral, and institutions that look after the health, economic, housing, and educational needs of the community.

As with other Ismailis, religious life was built around the *jamat khanas*, of which there are now twenty-six in the Northern Areas. Contact with other Ismailis has also brought about a great deal of uniformity in practice, though the specifically Central Asian character of the Ismaili heritage has been maintained. Persian Ismaili literature and literature in the local languages remain the main source; and the Arabic script with additional Urdu characters is now employed to record material in the local languages. All these changes reflect the growing consciousness of an Ismaili identity within the larger context of a Pakistani Muslim nation and bring in its wake all the ambiguities that accompany the larger transition going on in the Muslim world and the transition the Ismailis of the Northern Areas have to make as a minority within this larger *Ummah*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above developments raise general questions about how change comes about in traditionally religious communities like the Ismailis, where the religious heritage has obviously constituted one of the sources of vitality in modern times. It also raises broad questions about how religions like Islam may adapt to existing conditions and the tension and ambiguity inherent in both processes of change and adaptation and their relationship to an Islamic sense of identity.

In a recent essay, Mary Douglas argues that "events have taken Religious Studies by surprise".[4] As an example, she cites the fact that scholars were unable to foretell the so-called resurgence of Islam. Their inability to perceive the vitality and revival of traditional religious forms is traced to the absence of a critical methodology and undue focus on secularization as the major tool for comprehending responses in societies where modernization is taking place. In the case of modern and contemporary Islam, it can be argued that some of the methodological shortcomings identified by Mary Douglas have recently led scholars to overemphasize one particular aspect, namely, the conjunction of faith and political power. It is noteworthy that several recent scholarly books have incorporated this notion as a central concern, so much so that the word "power" occurs in the titles of the works themselves.[5]

In societies that have come to believe that the power of religion has been neutralized by secularization and modernity and shifted to other domains, such a trend in religious consciousness appears only to be menacing and threatening. And an overemphasis on it causes one to miss or ignore much of the transformative potential within the religious consciousness. Misleadingly simplistic perspectives obscure the complexity of the search for self-identification within the Islamic tradition and the efforts of particular Muslims to confront the issues of the modern age. The situation demands, as Robert Bellah indicates,[6] more than the simplistic paradigm of a movement from "traditional" to "modern". It requires a focus on how religious

tradition acts as a "moderating" or "equilibrating" force that does not withdraw from the crisis of modernity through utopian or authoritative modes but rather responds to it and shapes the direction in which society is to move.

In this paper, I have tried to show how one Muslim group has sought to address itself to the problems of modernity and to develop solutions and strategies for maintaining continuity and equilibrium by anchoring its sense of identity in its vision of Islam. In common with many other fellow-Muslims, the Ismailis believe that the disengagement of the issues of modern life from an Islamic perspective would create a dichotomy and an artificial division in their approach to the world, and that such a posture would in any case be antagonistic to the spirit and experience of Islam. The crux of the experience as reflected specifically in the approach adopted by the Nizari Ismailis, revolves around the ideal of creating a society to serve both material and spiritual needs. As Jacques Berque has pointed out, the acceptance of modernity and the challenges it poses necessitates one of two attitudes: first, adapting while preserving certain safety mechanisms; and second, and more complex, integrating what he calls the "movement of the world" into one's own system.[7] Among Muslims, these processes can by no means be homogeneous since they are diverse peoples with different backgrounds and contexts. Yet at the heart of all their responses appears to be a shared concern for establishing a balance among all the elements of the system: the practice of faith, the threat of secularization, the aspiration for material development and growth, and the building of bridges between Muslims and others in an increasingly shrinking and interdependent world. By focusing on how two segments of the Ismaili community, living under totally different material conditions, have addressed these various issues, I hope the paper has illustrated both the unity and the diversity of Muslim responses to modernization, and thrown some light on the dilemma highlighted at the Congress in Hans Mol's opening address regarding the balance religions try to achieve as they seek to maintain order and transcendence in the face of increasing complexity and the threat of disorder.

NOTES

1. For the Ismailis in general, see W. Madelung, "Ismailiyya", *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954-), Vol. IV, 198-206 and S.H. Nasr (ed.) *Ismaili Contributions to Islamic Culture* (Teheran: 1977).
2. The material for the paper is drawn in part from two other studies, see Azim Nanji, "A Religious Minority in Transition: The Case of Two Ismaili Communities", in *Papers in Comparative Studies: Religion in the Modern World*, Vol. 3 (1984) 169-182, and "Moral Principles in Tension: The Case of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims" in *Shariat and Alternative Codes of Behaviour in Southern Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
3. From an interview with H.H. The Aga Khan in *Pakistan and Gulf Economist* (March 12-18, 1983), p. 11.
4. Mary Douglas, "The Effect of Modernization on Religious Change," *Daedalus*, 3/4 (Winter, 1982), 1.
5. Examples include A.S. Cudsi and Ali Dessouki (eds.) *Islam and Power* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); E. Mortimore, *Faith and Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); and Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
6. Robert Bellah, "Religion and Secularization in Societies" in *Papers in Comparative Studies*, see n. 2.
7. Jacque Berque, "Islam and Innovation," in *Islam, Philosophy and Science* (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1981) 73.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE IMMORTALS AND THE TAOIST IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

Like the lives of saints in Christianity, the biographies of Taoist immortals (*hsien*) provide exemplars for the Taoist life. They are models for imitation and identification. In so doing, these stories reveal the true significance of the teaching of a religion in a manner often missing in philosophical discussions, for, in a biography, abstract thoughts are translated into possible practical actions.[1] Specific to our interest, stories of the immortals reveal the nature and state of the Taoist goal, the extraordinary powers they enjoy, the religious practices they follow and the conduct they prefer. To anticipate our conclusion, the Taoist exemplar reveals in every respect the classic functions of a religion. The immortal provides an identity which defeats the fundamental limitations encountered in human life: death, sickness, old age, powerlessness and social evil. On becoming an immortal, human life is ultimately transformed.

Such a conclusion differs significantly from current interpretations of the Taoist goal. Current interpretations of Taoism show particular interest in those aspects of the Tao which equate it with the order of nature. The latter is understood to mean that all things change by themselves according to certain regular patterns. To follow the Tao means to acquiesce in the unfolding of the process of life and death. To participate in the natural rhythm is all there is to human destiny. Assuredly there are concepts in *Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Huai-nan Tzu* and others which lead to the naturalistic interpretation. Lao Tzu says, "The Way conforms with Nature (*Tao fa Tzu-ian*)." (ch. 25) Chuang Tzu's attitude towards death, shown in a few stories, is that one should resign oneself to the natural process.[2] Yet the concept of Tao presents another aspect which is difficult to reconcile with the order of nature. Tao is the trancendent reality behind the world of phenomena. The one who possesses the Tao rises above the limitations imposed by nature. Chuang Tzu's emphasis on unlimited freedom, mysticism and the extraordinary powers acquired by the Perfect Man seems to indicate that there is no simple answer to his position with respect to death or nature. To delve deeper into this question is beyond the scope and intention of this paper. Here I only want to draw attention to the inadequacy of drawing a conclusion with respect to the Taoist view of religion on the basis of the simple equation of Taoism with naturalism.

Being convinced of the equation of Taoism with naturalism, some scholars interested in the Taoist belief in the immortality pill seek to explain that immortality can be completely natural. To support their case they sometimes exerted a free hand in their interpretations. For example, they say that Taoist paradises are simply secluded scenic places within this world. They consistently avoid extensive discussions of inner alchemy (*nei-tan*) and the experiences of these Taoists because it is hard to see how these are natural processes.

The upshot of these interpretations is that the Taoist is seen as seeking nothing but to be natural. The logical conclusion from this position is that the Taoist does

not seek any ultimate transformation. In other words, the Taoist has no religious consciousness. And since naturalism is also thought to be widely accepted by persons who call themselves Confucians and Buddhists of the Ch'an school, it is sometimes said to be the Chinese world-view. The conclusion is, if the equation of Taoism with naturalism be correct, the Chinese have no religious consciousness and they have no need of religion. My analysis of the biographies of the immortals shows that this opinion could not be farther from the truth. In fact, the biographies can be fully understood only in terms of a religious quest. The main bulk of this essay is to enter into dialogue with one of the current chief interpreters of *hsienhood* and to show how material from the biographies can serve as correctives to his interpretation.

NEEDHAM'S INTERPRETATION

The most celebrated interpreter of the *hsien* phenomenon in recent years is Joseph Needham. In volume 5 part 2 of his monumental work *Science and Civilization in China*, which deals with alchemy and chemistry, he sets out to answer the question as to why belief in the drug of immortality and its active pursuit occurred in China and China alone.[3] It is assumed that the effect of the elixer is the indefinite prolongation of this life and its rejuvenation. Needham thinks that there are two pre-conditions for the rise of the belief in the drug of immortality: (i) there must be a great love of life on earth;[4] and (ii) there must be an absence of belief in another world the entrance to which is ethically determined.[5] If ethics becomes the determining factor for entrance into another world, there would be no point in seeking the elixer. If the only world that exists is this world, then it makes sense to look for some sort of medicine which may prolong this life indefinitely. If ethics makes no difference to the span of life, then the only means of prolonging life is material.

Needham thinks these two conditions existed in ancient China and they permitted the belief in the drug of immortality to rise. Needham's characterization of *hsienhood* entails two corollaries. First, an indefinite prolongation of life is not contrary to nature.[6] Since the pursuants of elixer are Taoists and Taoists are said to be followers of nature, it is imperative, assuming a consistency to exist within the Taoist view, that the above be true. Second, all phenomena associated with *hsien* must show naturalistic characteristics. For example, Taoist paradises are not inaccessible other-worlds but are only some actual far-away mountains or islands of this world. The Yellow Spring (*huang ch'üan*) is not abysmal hell but merely some sort of a cave a few yards below ground. The existence of Earthly-immortals (*ti-hsien*) who refuse the Taoist paradise indicates the ethos for the natural.

Needham went to great lengths in search of supports for these corollaries. In order to clarify what he meant by the absence of other-worldly belief in Chinese culture, he made a comparison of the beliefs about the after-life in all religions. For this purpose, he constructed a diagram on page 78. A discussion of this diagram will be made below. What Needham intended to do is very clear. He has determined that the world-view of the Taoist is the order of nature. A superior will, spirits, demons and ghosts do not exist. The only reality is the world of nature. Man arranges the best he can from whatever forces he can summon from nature. Thus, he makes the Taoist a believer in modern materialism. The pursuit of immortality is only a little skill one acquires along the way of discovery of nature, almost a pastime on the same level as the harnessing of natural forces by the invention of machines. As Needham sees it, the Taoist is so perfectly happy with life in this world that he does not feel the need for a radical change. The Taoist is devoid of a religious sense. I would suggest, however, that Needham's characterization of the Taoist immortal

does not tell the whole story and that the phenomenon of the *hsien* will be better understood in terms of a religious quest.

REPLY TO NEEDHAM

The unsatisfactoriness of Needham's interpretation of the immortals springs from the fact that he seeks a strict consistency in Taoist thought and action that may not have been there in the first place. To Needham, Taoism means the belief that the universe operates according to its own inbuilt laws alone. That is the only reality. A Taoist is one who seeks to allow nature to play out its own development to the full. That is the meaning of *wu-wei*. Needham, therefore, sets himself the task of proving that all other Taoist thought and activities must be consistent with the above definition. This task is wholly unnecessary! First of all, we do not have a defined essence called Taoism. Considering that diverse and even contradictory doctrines are grouped under Taoism, we are not sure if the word is anything more than a bibliographical label.[7] We are not sure if the Taoists who express belief in the order of nature are also those who experimented with immortality drugs. Second, even if they were the same people, it is still not necessary to assume that they felt urged to connect belief in the order of nature with the experiment in immortality drugs, anymore than liturgical Taoists feel the necessity of reconciling the theory of *yin-yang* and five phases with the belief in gods. Taoists themselves never claimed that in seeking the immortality pill, they were following *wu-wei*. On the contrary, there were Taoists who scorned those who attempted to lengthen their lives by various means. Chuang Tzu chided those who practice "bear-hangings and bird-stretchings, hoping to lengthen their lives".[8] Following nature would be to accept death with an even mind, if Chuang Tzu's several stories on death are admitted as significant.[9]

On the meaning of "following nature" it should be pointed out that Needham understands the term differently from the ancient Chinese. The consequence of Needham's view that the only reality is that of Nature is that man may do whatever he wants to do and yet still be within nature, for the only course of action that may have any effect must be bound by the laws of nature. "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her."[10] Man cannot not be bound by the laws of nature. He is powerless in acting against nature. In effect, Needham allows the Taoist all sorts of experiments and inventions of techniques and declares that none of these activities are against *wu-wei*. That may be Needham's thinking, but it is certainly not Taoist thinking. Needham's understanding would have made the Taoist injunction *wu-wei* redundant, for if man is completely powerless if he acts against nature, what is the point of telling him not to act against nature. He could never harm nature or anybody anyway. For the ancient Chinese, *tzu-jan* means the regular outcome of events. The deliberate interference of the normal pattern like the use of the immortality drug and other techniques is unnatural. That is why the immortality pill is called an unnatural thing (*pu jan chih wu*).[11] Naturalism would mean, according to Chuang Tzu, acquiescence in the natural life-span.[12]

This-worldly/other-worldly

It would be so much easier to equate Taoism with naturalism if one could show that Taoists have no conception of another world, and that paradises and hells are actual places on earth. Needham designed a diagram which represented the major types of beliefs with respect to the after-life.[13] The major division in this diagram is between the belief in the other-world and the belief that the immortals and the dead are bound within this world. The "other-worldly" type of belief stemmed from Indo-Iranian sources which spread to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

The "this-worldly" type included the Israelite belief in Sheol, the Greek in Hades and Chinese beliefs. It is not clear how Needham distinguishes the "other-worldly" from the "this-worldly". It seems that for him, it is the presence of a judgment and the separation of the good from the evil that makes these abodes other-worldly, for these places are unthinkable within this world.[14] In a note in which he disagrees with Yu Ying-shih's distinction between the "this-worldly" and the "other-worldly", it can be deduced that Needham was thinking of actual physical worlds.[15]

Though appearing simple and attractive, Needham's diagram opens a can of worms when his concepts are examined closely. He thinks that entrance to the other-world is ethically determined. Any beginning theology student can tell him that Heaven is a gratuitous gift, that is, man is saved by God's grace. In the Indian scene, no matter how much good work one may do one may never attain *moksha*. Only true knowledge (*jñāna*) can free man from this world (*samsāra*). These are minor errors compared to the major difficulty of his diagram.

The major difficulty with Needham's scheme is his distinction between the this-worldly and the other-worldly. When Needham talks about the other world, he means an actual, physical other world. Now, we moderns, well-used to the rounded earth and the solar system, have no difficulty at all in conceiving of another world. But for the ancient people to whom the earth is flat, it is impossible to conceive of another world which is not continuous with this one. Either it is Amitabha's paradise, which is extremely far away to the west, but still on earth, or it is Heaven above the dome of the sky, but still our sky. *Huai-nan-tzu* says, "Being circular the heavens have no edge and that is why they cannot be observed; being square the earth has no limit and that is why none can spy out her gates."[16] Hell is below ground. The point is, it is impossible to distinguish between the Christian or the Indian Heaven and the sky abode of the Taoist immortals with respect to their this-worldly or other-worldly character. Dante toured Hell through a cave that led below ground. Ought one then designate the Christian Hell as this-worldly? Needham was not unaware of the difficulty of the concept of actual physical other-worlds. That is why he retreated to a different criterion for distinguishing the other-world from this one: the presence of a judgment or ethical determination. But why should the presence of an ethical determination be a criterion for distinguishing the other-world from this world? The Christian Heaven is not ethically determined inasmuch as Christ saves by his grace. The entrance to the Taoist paradise is ethically determined in the sense that, according to an almost unanimous Taoist view, only the moral person can advance in the Taoist path.

Taoist paradises

The most damaging evidence against the usefulness of Needham's this-worldly other-worldly scheme is in the descriptions of the Taoist paradises themselves. How happy would Needham be if it were true to say that "the deathless being remained among the scenic beauties of earth or ascended as a perfect immortal to the ranks of the Administration on high — in either case within the natural world suffused by the Tao of all things."[17] But Taoist paradises are never as natural as Needham wished them to be. Let us examine a few examples. In the first chapter of Chuang Tzu, there is a description of a Holy Man living on faraway Ku-she mountain.[18] This Holy Man is invariably taken to mean a Taoist immortal. Not only is he an etherealized being capable of climbing the clouds and riding a flying dragon, but he is also capable, by concentrating his spirits, to protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. In short, he has miraculous powers. He escapes from the limitations confronted by mortal men. Would that not go against Needham's concept of the Taoist after-life, where both good and evil men indifferently find their abode? Just

what on earth is a "flying dragon" in the natural world? I have already pointed out that it is impossible for the ancient people to conceive of an other-world in Needham's sense. When the story mentions a faraway Ku-she mountain, it is tantamount to saying "in another world." This Taoist paradise is so fantastic that Chien Wu, the man who related the story, thinks it "wild and wide of the mark, never coming near human affairs."[19] After telling the story, Chien Wu said, "I thought this was insane and refused to believe it."[20] This paradise is so great a contrast from ordinary human life that it represents an ultimate liberation from the limitations of life on earth. The story makes religious sense.

The book *Lieh Tzu* has the same story, but it contains a longer description of the idealized condition of the holy mountain.

> There, the *yin* and the *yang* forces are always in harmony; the sun and the moon are always bright; the four seasons rotate in smooth succession; the wind and the rain are always well-balanced. Living things get their timely sustenance and harvests of grains are always bountiful. The earth will not cause death or injury; the inhabitants will not harbour malice; myriad things will not bring disease and ghosts will have no baleful influence.[21]

A natural place on earth may have scenic beauty but it may never be conceived to be in such an ideal condition. Furthermore, the cause of those conditions is the presence of the Holy Man in the mountain and not vice versa.

The Taoists themselves were well aware that such paradises were mythological and not actual places on earth. In a description of another paradise, the Kingdom of Hua-hsü, Lieh Tzu has this to say:

> The kingdom of Hua-hsü was situated I know not how many tens of thousands of miles distant from the Ch'i State. It was beyond the reach of ship or vehicle or any mortal foot. Only the soul could travel so far.[22]

This paradise is incalculably faraway from the Middle Kingdom. This is the ancient people's way of saying that it is in another world. It is unreachable by all modes of transportation. It can only be visited by the spirit. Will this story not lay to rest Needham's theory that the Taoist paradise is this-worldly? The idealized condition of the Kingdom of Hua-hsü is similar to that of the Ku-she:

> This kingdom was without head or ruler; it simply went on of itself. Its people were without desires or cravings; they simply followed their natural instincts. They felt neither joy in life nor abhorrence of death; thus they came to no untimely ends. They felt neither attachment to self nor indifference to others; thus they were exempt from love and hatred alike. They knew neither aversion from one course nor inclination to another; hence profit and loss existed not among them. All were equally untouched by the emotions of love and sympathy, of jealousy and fear. Water had no power to drown them, nor fire to burn; cuts and blows caused them neither injury nor pain, scratching or tickling could not make them itch. They bestrode the air as though treading on solid earth; they were cradled in space as though resting in a bed. Clouds and mist obstructed not their vision, thunder-peals could not stun their ears, physical beauty disturbed not their hearts, mountains and valleys hindered not their steps. They moved about like gods.[23]

The isles of the blessed are also unattainable places.
Again Lieh Tzu says:

> To the east of the P'o sea — I do not know how many hundreds of millions of miles away — there is the Grand Chasm. It is actually a bottomless ravine

> ... In it there are five mountains. They are namely Tai-yü, Yüan-ch'iao, Fang-hu, Ying-chou and P'eng-lai.[24]

These islands are more than hundreds of millions of miles away to the east. This is a way of saying that they do not belong to this world. *Shih-chi* also says:

> The three holy mountains, P'eng-lai, Fang-chang and Ying-chou are said to be in the P'o sea, not far from human habitation. If one were to go there, his boat would invariably be led away by a wind. It is reported by those who have gone there that on these mountains various immortal beings and the drug of immortality are found. All objects and living creatures are white in colour. The palaces are made of gold and silver. When viewed from a distance, the mountains look like clouds. When one arrives at the location, the three mountains appear from under water. When one goes near them, a wind immediately blows him away. In effect, no one is able to reach these mountains.[25]

"No one is able to reach these mountains." This is a way of saying that these islands are mythological. They are not actual places on which one can set foot.

Contrary to Needham's beloved idea that the Chinese love life on earth, the immortal can become weary of the world and depart from it. Chuang Tzu recorded such a case:

> When the world has the Way, the sage joins in the chorus with all other things. When the world is without the Way, he nurses his Virtue and retires in leisure. And after a thousand years, should he weary of the world, he will leave it and ascend to the immortals, riding on those white clouds all the way up to the village of God. The three worries (old age, sickness and death) never touch him, his body is forever free of peril.[26]

If the immortal leaves the world, does he not go into another world? Is the village of God not another world?

Lastly, I want to recall the story of Hu Kung.[27] Hu Kung was an immortal who carried an empty gourd with him. Every night, when he retired, he jumped into his gourd. Later, his secret was discovered. When asked why he jumped into the gourd, Hu Kung invited the questioner to jump after him. Lo! What opened up within the gourd was a paradise complete with doors, paths, buildings, servants and so on. Does this paradise not belong to another world?

None of these descriptions of Taoist paradises fit with Needham's idea that they are "within the natural world suffused by the Tao of all things." They are all idealized places where the causes of human unhappiness are expurgated. Living there is a contrast to life on earth where there is old age, sickness and death. Paradises are frequently marked with geographical directions, but that does not mean they can actually be found. That is why they are said to be millions of miles away. Their phony directions must have been deliberate. On the one hand, geographical directions must be provided to indicate their reality. On the other hand, they must not be thought to be normally accessible. That is to say: Paradises are real but they are beyond this world.

Indeed, Needham's distinction between this-worldly and other-worldly paradises serves no useful purpose in religious interpretation. In terms of religious meaning, it is not important whether paradise is in another solar system or in some rather distant corner on earth. The relative inaccessibility of paradises in the latter case render them to have the same values as other-worlds. What is religiously significant about paradises is their unusual, idealized conditions which cannot be described as natural. In providing a scenario where life's defects are made whole, Taoist paradises

serve to define the Taoist identity. In other words, stories about after-life should be treated as mythological in the sense that myths in other religions serve to define man's situation in the Universe.

The hsien's Transcendent Life

Needham's thesis on why alchemy flourished in Taoism depends on three assumptions: First, nature must be regarded as the only reality. There must be a belief that only this world exists. Taoist paradises are merely scenic locations somewhere on earth. Second, it is possible, by harnessing the forces of nature, to extend human life indefinitely. Third, Chinese love life in this world. One of the consequences of these assumptions is that *hsienhood* is nothing more than an indefinite prolongation of this life on this earth. I have already discussed extensively part of the first assumption in connection with Needham's distinction between the this-worldly and the other-worldly. Here I shall take up the other assumptions and shall try to show that contrary to his view the *hsien* leads a transcendent life, an existence on a higher plane.

Needham writes, "In accord with the basically this-worldly ethos of the Chinese, life on earth was found good and greatly treasured, so that from the Shang period onwards emphasis on longevity grew and grew, length of life in some quiet hermitage or surrounded by one's descendants being the greatest blessing the Heaven could confer."[28] "The ancient Chinese were a very this-worldly people, full of the love of life and a zest for its joys and pleasures."[29] As a general description, it is true to say that the Chinese love life, but it would be a mistake to single it out as a characteristic which marks the Chinese off from other members of the human race. So did the Aryans love life, the Hebrews, the Greeks. Can we find any people who does not treasure longevity? Why is it in all nations royal subjects cannot find a better salutation than to wish long life to their kings?

Needham lays great store on the "this-worldly ethos of the Chinese." Paradoxically, while Confucians may be said to have a this-worldly ethos, it is uncertain whether this designation fits well with Taoists. Those things which constitute this-worldly happiness — a lot of wealth, numerous children and grandchildren, hearty appetite, reputation among peers — are exactly what Taoists despise. Taoists reject having a good name and official positions. They reject rich food, fine dress and any sign of opulence which goes with worldly happiness. They prefer seclusion and quiet in mountains and caves. Disenchantment with the world was what drove Ch'ü Yüan to follow the steps of Ch'ih Sung Tzu, who had washed off the world's dust.

Yü Ying-shih expressed doubt whether rulers, well used to the pleasures of the palace, could whole-heartedly pursue the way of the immortals even though they desire everlasting life.[30] Taoists do these things precisely because they are not satisfied with what the world can offer. That is why paradises are invariably depicted as far superior to this world. To be sure, in the stories about Taoists, longevity is frequently mentioned as a sign of their accomplishment, but desire for longevity may not be used to indicate a love of this world. It indicates a desire for life as opposed to death. If, perchance, someone should use the story of Mr White-Stone, who preferred to stay in this world rather than to go up to heaven, to prove that the Taoist loved this world, it could be pointed out that it was precisely the unusual preference for this world which has made this story so famous.[31] It is the exception which makes the rule. The story originally may have an axe to grind. The reason why Mr White-Stone did not want to go to heaven was that he did not want to take a place among the celestial bureaucracy. The story may have been intended to serve as a criticism of the earthly bureaucracy. All discussions of the immortals rank *t'ien-hsien* (heavenly immortal) superior to *ti-hsien* (earthly immortal).

In Needham's naturalistic interpretation, becoming a *hsien* simply means an indefinite prolongation of this life through the power of immortality drug. If this were true, there should be a smooth transition from being a mortal to being an immortal. The biographies of the immortals, on the other hand, present a different picture. There is a clear disjunction between ordinary human life and life of an immortal. An immortal proper must invariably be taken up to heaven. Those Taoists who were left behind, like the *ti-hsien*, were not properly immortals. T'ai P'ing Ching says, "For this reason, when a man has not yet obtained the Tao he remains but a man. When he has obtained the Tao he will be transformed into an immortal. Being an immortal, he will be wafted up to the heavens, and will undergo transformations according to Heaven."[33] It is proper for a *hsien* to ascend to heaven. In the story of P'eng Tsu in *Shen-hsien ch'uan*, a distinction between *hsien* and *ch'ang sheng* (longevity) or *Te Tao Che* (possessor of the Way) is made several times:

> "Please explain to me the way to lengthen my life." P'eng Tsu replied, "If you wish to raise your body up to heaven ... you should employ the golden pill ... That is why one is wafted up to heaven in broad daylight. That is Tao in its highest order. For the next in order, one should love to cultivate one's spirit and ingest herbal medicine. One may then attain longevity (*ch'ang-sheng*) but he cannot order the ghosts and spirits to serve him, or to fly in the air."[34]

There is a story about a Taoist called Mr Blue Essence (*Ch'ing ching hsien sheng*). He had lived a thousand years and yet his appearance was that of a boy. He could walk five hundred miles a day. He could abstain from food for a whole year and yet he could also eat nine meals in a day. On being asked what kind of *hsien* Mr Blue Essence was, Tsu replied, "He is merely one who has obtained Tao, he is not yet a *hsien*."[35] Again, P'eng Tsu said, "If a man learns a little about Tao, he can live up to two hundred and forty years. If he knows a bit more, he may live up to four hundred and eighty. If he knows all about Tao, he can be exempted from death. But he is not yet a *hsien*."[36] The point about P'eng Tsu's speeches is clear. Being a *hsien* entails much more than Needham's indefinite prolongation of life on earth. Even the story of Mr White-Stone makes this distinction: "Mr White-Stone ... was already 2000 years old in the time of P'eng Tsu. He refused to practice the way of the ascending immortal (*scheng t'ien chih tao*) but only pursue the undying (*ch'ü yü pu ssu*)."[37]

Again, the story of I-chün wang-lao makes the distinction between the *hsien* proper who flies up to heaven and one who lives on indefinitely. Wang-lao and his entire household, including house, dogs and children, were wafted up to heaven while his servants were left behind a tree in the next village. The latter also attained eternal life (*ch'ang-sheng*).[38] Being able to fly into heaven is the dividing line between the *hsien* proper and those who are only on the way to becoming *hsiens*. Such an understanding is suggested by the *Hsü hsien ch'uan* which divides the biographies into two parts, the "Wafted-up-to-heaven" (*fei-sheng*) and the "Retire-to-transform" (*yin-hua*).[39] The preface of this book also says, "The one who follows the way of 'retire-to-transform' is one who, (dwelling) in a cave, retains his skin, changes his bones, preserves his breath and strengthens his body in the manner of a cicada, then, having completed becoming a true immortal, he is wafted up to heaven."[40] In other words, "retire-to-transform" is only a stage in the process of becoming a full-fledged hsien who can fly at will.

This ability to fly into a mythological world is carefully recorded in the biographies. In the *Lieh-hsien-ch'uan*, the characters used to indicate this ability are *sheng* (wafted up), *sheng-t'ien* (wafted up to heaven), *shang* (going up), *tu* (transcend), *chü* (depart).

For example, it is said of Neng-feng-tzu that he went up (*shang*) with smoke; of Ma-shih-huang that he departed (*chü*) on the back of a dragon; of Huang-ti that he was wafted up to heaven (*sheng-t'ien*); of P'eng Tsu that he rose up (*sheng*) to become a *hsien* and departed (*chü*); of Ch'ih-chiang tzu-yu that he said, "It is possible to walk in the clouds and human life can be made transcendent (*tu*)". The character *chü* is used in at least ten biographies in the *Lieh-hsien-ch'uan*. The terms *sheng, shang, tu, chü* represent a disjunction of the life of a *hsien* from those of mortals who live in this world. Even though it is hard for Taoists to conceive of other-worlds physically, their paradises are other-worldly in terms of religious meaning.

Enough has been said to demonstrate that Needham's naturalistic interpretation of the Taoist immortal is erroneous. Immortality is not simply an indefinite prolongation of this life in some scenic spot on earth. Becoming a *hsien* entails a disjunction from this life and an advancement to an otherwise inaccessible state where conditions of life are idealized and where all human limitations are transcended. The phenomenon of immortality is not a corollary of the philosophy of the order of nature. It arises from a religious concern that is common to humanity. It is for this reason that ultimate transformation is offered to the accomplished immortal.

NOTES

(1) The point that biographies are exemplars and that they reveal the truth of the religion is recognized by the collector of biographies himself. One example is the Yüan Dynasty collector Chao Tao-i, who said, "I shall discuss the Way and its Power with fair-mindedness; I shall reveal the exemplary lives of the immortals so as to make manifest the authentic teaching and to exalt the Great Transformation." *Li-shih chen hsien ti tao t'ung-ch'ien*. TT139 or Harvard-Yenching Index no. (HY) 150, *hsü*, 8a.

(2) Burton Watson, tr., *The Complete Work of Chuang Tzu* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1968), ch.6, p.85, story about Master Lai; ch.18, pp.191-2, death of Chuang Tzu's wife.

(3) Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p.71.

(4) *Ibid.*, p.82.

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) *Ibid.*, p.83.

(7) Arthur F. Wright, in "A Historian's Reflections on the Taoist Tradition", *History of Religions*, Vol.9 nos.2 and 3, (1969-70), 248-255, valiantly suggested, very tentatively, common attitudes among the various strands called Taoist. However, he has not examined whether the three common attitudes he put forward are compatible among themselves or not.

(8) *Chuang Tzu*, ch.15; cf. Watson, *op. cit.*, p.167.

(9) See note 2 above.

(10) Bacon's saying quoted by Needham, *op. cit.*, p.84.

(11) *Han-fei-tzu*, ch.32, as quoted in Needham, *op. cit.*, p.95.

(12) See note 2 above.

(13) Needham, *op. cit.*, p.78, table 93.

(14) *Ibid.*, p.80.

(15) *Ibid.*, p.95, note c. See also last sentence on p.77.

(16) *Huai-nan-tzu*, ch.15, p.253. Translation by Michael Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1982), p.52.

(17) Needham, *op. cit.*, p.82.

(18) Watson, *op. cit.*, p.33.

(19) *Ibid.*

(20) *Ibid.*

(21) Translated from *Lieh-tzu chi shih*, p.45.

(22) Lionel Giles, *Taoist Teachings* (London: John Murray, 1947), p.35. Slight adjustment made to translation.

(23) *Ibid.*, pp.35-36.

(24) Translated from *Lieh tzu chi shih*, pp.151-152.

(25) *Shih Chi*, chüan 28, pp.1369-1370.

(26) Mainly Watson's translation, *op. cit.*, p.130, with modifications.

(27) *Shen-hsien ch'uan*, cited in *T'ai-p'ing kuang chi*, chüan 12.

(28) Needham, *op. cit.*, p.82.

(29) *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.

(30) Ying-shih Yü, "Life and Immortality in the Mind of Han China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.25 (1964-65), pp.94, 102.

(31) Needham, *op. cit.*, p.107.

(32) For example, *T'ai Shang Ling-Pao Wu Fu Ching, Pao P'u Tzu*, cited by Needham, op. cit., p.106.

(33) *T'ai P'ing Ching*, p.282.

(34) *Shen-hsien -ch'uan*, cited in *T'ai p'ing kuang chi*, chüan 2, p.9.

(35) *Ibid.*

(36) *Ibid.*, p.10.

(37) *Li-shih chen hsien ti tao t'ung-ch'ien* (TT139), chüan 4, 1.

(38) *Hsü hsien ch'uan* (TT138), I chün wang lao, first chüan, pp.3-4.

(39) *Ibid.*, first chüan, p.1; second chüan, p.1.

(40) *Ibid.*, hsü, p.1.

Related works by the author of this paper:

"Tan Tse Tao: A Contemporary Chinese Faith-healing Sect in Hong Kong". Forthcoming in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Hong Kong Branch.

GLOSSARY

ch'ang-sheng
Chao Tao-i
Ch'ih-chiang tzu-yü
Ch'ing ching hsien sheng
chü
ch'ü yü pu ssu
chüan
Fang-hu
fei-sheng
Han fei tzu
hsien
hsü
Hsü hsien ch'uan
Hsü Ti-shan
Hu Kung
Hua-hsü
Huai-nan-tzu
huang ch'üan
Huang-ti
I chün wang lao
li
Li shih chen hsien ti tao t'ung ch'ien
Lieh hsien ch'uan
Lieh Tzu
Lieh tzu chi shih
Ma-shih huang
nei tan
Neng-feng-tzu
Pao P'u Tzu
P'eng'lai
P'eng Tsu
pu jan chih wu
shang
Shen-hsien ch'uan
sheng
sheng hsien chih tao
sheng-t'ien
Shih Chi
T'ai P'ing Ching
T'ai p'ing Kuang chi
T'ai Shang Ling-pao Wu-fu Ching
Tai-yü
Tao fa tzu-jan
ti hsien
t'ien hsien
tu
tú-shih
tzu-jan
wu-wei
yin-hua
Ying-chou
Yüan-ch'iao