Treasure Rozier (Comments Please)

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“What beliefs from each of the three religious traditions of the region might explain the East Asian peoples’ unique capacity for sustaining the three without choosing one?”
Religion is an important component in almost every culture and civilization. There have been countless wars throughout the world over what religion should be dominant in any given region, and in most cases one or another ultimately prevails. However, East Asia has been able to maintained three distinct religions for centuries without any substantial conflict. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism are practiced and accepted equally among the people who live there. Each of these exists concurrently with the others because there are no incompatible differences between the three: the practical applications of each to the East Asian culture are much the same.

Confucianism has changed little over its’ history and continues to be practiced today according to traditional teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi (Lai, 1). It can be considered a philosophy as well as a religion. In fact, because it provides a moral or ethical framework with an emphasis on education and respect, without significant attention to an afterlife, it has been argued that it is more philosophy to living a virtuous life than religious teaching (Vuong, 2012). The option to practicing Confucianism as a philosophy helps prevent potential conflict with either Buddhism or Daoism. Furthermore, Confucianism focusses on bettering one’s self through education, keeping good relations with people, and respecting one another. These teachings are more about morality generally than any specific religious following.

Daoism can also be practiced as either a religion or a philosophy. Daoism is an inherent aspect of the Chinese and East Asian culture, religion, and philosophical context (Juzefovič, 172). This can be seen in the practice of Feng Shui, Chinese numerology and, the Chinese New Year (Oxtoby & Segal, 490-491), which exemplify daily practices that extend from Daoist beliefs. The assumption of such Daoist practices serves to legitimize them throughout East Asia making Daoism an integral part of the culture, not just the religion, of the area and helps explain why Daoism continues to thrive. This makes Daoism vital to the region and partially explains
why it is still around today. Daoism’s main concern is to keep peace and harmony while following one’s path. The philosophical emphasis on behavior, as opposed to a deity or an afterlife, as well as its similarity of moral value with Confucianism helps to further strengthen the compatibility of these two “religions”. Even more, Daoist teachings are relatively lenient which allows Daoism to coexist with most any religion which has a concern for harmonious relations with other (Voung, 2012).

Buddhism is a commonly practiced religion in East Asia. There are different types of Buddhism, all of which are founded on the same principles and teachings. In Buddhism, there are multiple gods, each of which represents something different. Buddhists believe in worshipping gods through different rituals (Oxtoby & Segal, 416-417). Unlike Confucianists and Daoists they have many different beliefs about the afterlife. Buddhists believe that one is reincarnated until they finally reach Nirvana or Enlightenment, which is a state of peace (Oxtoby & Segal, 387,391). Nirvana can be something different for everyone. The fact that Confucianism and Daoism do not talk about what happens after one dies helps to not have conflict between them and Buddhism. It leaves room for other religions to believe what they want to believe about the afterlife. Also, Confucianism and Daoism’s teachings have a lot to do with doing what is right. This, in a way, goes along with Buddhism’s teachings of doing one’s duty or dharma. They believe they were put on this earth to do their dharma and they must do this to receive good karma (Oxtoby & Segal, 389-390).

Daoism and Confucianism have a lot of similarities. As mentioned above they can be considered a philosophy or a religion, which is why they work so well with other religions because they do not conflict with other teachings. In both of these teachings they are focused on the dao (Cheng, 124). This is the path in which they should follow. Both Confucianism and
Daoism give ways in which one should follow this said path, but both ways are a little different. Confucianism’s way is a little more strict and exact, while Daoism is more imaginative and lenient (Vuong, 2012). Both believe in opposing and complimentary forces, Yin and Yang. They believe that each balances the other out and that they help to make everything work harmoniously (Cheng, 124). Yang is considered masculine, hard, dry, bright, and aggressive, while Yin is considered to be more feminine, soft, moist, dark, and accommodating (Oxtoby & Segal, 456). Confucianism’s teachings are normally considered more Yang, while Daoism’s are considered more Yin; in a way they balance one another out (Vuong, 2012). Neither Daoism nor Confucianism speaks much of an afterlife; they are both focused more on how one should live their own lives while here on Earth.

There are many connections between these three religions that help them to work side by side. Some overlaps in the Daoist and Buddhist practices exist; such as a Daoist text that illustrates similarities of Tibetan and Japanese tantric Buddhist rituals with Daoist practices (Saso, 224). Also, Ouyi a “syncretist” believed that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all share the same origins and he interpreted Confucianism in Buddhist terms by matching Confucius ideas with Buddhist ones (Lo, 274). These connections are possible another possible explanation for why these three religions have survived together in this region for so long.

In addition to their basic similarities, only Buddhism is necessarily a religion. While Confucianism and Daoism are practiced as religions by some (Oxtoby & Segal, 468), it is probably more often they are practiced as philosophies, rather than true religions. The fact that they are practiced as philosophies and have no conflicting deities or godhead per se, there is no “who is god?” dilemma to prevent them from flourishing alongside the Buddhist religious beliefs
and practices. One can practice Buddhism while still bettering themselves as people through one of the other two teachings.
Work Cited:


