# HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

**Week 1: Introduction: God, Nature and Dao**
**Section 2: Thought, philosophy-science-religion vs Teachings. Removing religious assumptions**

- Are the teachings we are talking about religion or philosophy?
- Chinese classics did not use the distinction nor the word ‘thought’ - they used ‘teachings’, ‘schools’, ‘learning’
    - Focus of schools was transmission, accumulation, learning and culture
    - Schools “contend”, discuss, debate - a very public and social metaphor, not a private psychological process typical of Western philosophy
- Many accounts say Chinese 家*jia*[schools] means philosophy and 教*jiao*[*teaching*] means religion - don’t believe them!
- The distinction between religion and philosophy is a Western one - the Chinese did not refer to these distinctions until the modern period
- A simple division is between supernaturalism and naturalism - with Chinese teachings dealing in naturalism
    - However, religion scholars and philosophers fight for  the intellectual territory
    - There are discussions about whether Buddhism, Confucianism or Daoism are religions or philosophies
- Subject matter of philosophy and religion can overlap - the differences lie mainly in method
- Western philosophy self-identifies with logic- Chinese philosophy does not
- When Chinese scholars did discover logic, most claimed the old masters were philosophers
    - Without classical logic, the masters were still reasoning clearly, giving good arguments

- This would mark them as kind of philosophy as religion would rely mainly on authority
    - Chief example is the authority of a supernatural God
    - Also a religion if you depend on the authority of a particular text, on traditions, practices, vision or mystical experience
- Philosophy, on the other hand, comes about when progress in the content comes about through discussion, exchange, contending
    - Schools disagree and debate and, as a result, we make intellectual progress
    - Free from authority, teachings make progress through discussion
- In the West we think of a natural evolution of thought, an evolution of philosophy
    - Human thought begins as religion and philosophy gradually evolves from religion
    - However, in the Chinese case, we can find a powerful counter-examples
    - In China the fully-fledged, obvious religions come only after the classical philosophical period
- We will rely on the minimal version of 'philosophy vs religion: emphasis on naturalism
    - We will look at the first historical doctrine of ethics in the Chinese tradition
    - We will discover an explicitly naturalist conception of normativity