

On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)

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History of Religions

Robert Ford Company

ON THE VERY IDEA OF
RELIGIONS (IN THE
MODERN WEST AND IN
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CHINA)

Well into the nineteenth century, there “were” only four religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and a fourth variously named Paganism, Idolatry, or Heathenism.¹ Today a researcher can claim, “We have identified nine thousand and nine hundred distinct and separate religions in the world,

Some of the positions taken below to some extent resemble those argued by Stephen R. Bokenkamp in an as yet unpublished paper, “The Silkworm and the Bodhi Tree: The Lingbao Attempt to Replace Buddhism in China and Our Attempt to Place Lingbao Daoism,” of which I received a copy only at a late phase in the writing of this essay. My remarks here were first delivered in sketch form at a symposium at Harvard University in May 2000, and then more elaborately at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Washington, D.C., in April 2002, and I am grateful for the opportunity to present them in both venues. I am also grateful to Bokenkamp, John McRae, and Michael Satlow for critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ For an overview, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 275–80; on the extension of this typology to colonial frontiers, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), pp. 32, 238–41; on the mid-Victorian shift from classification to diffusion and then development as the major tropes—or, as the Scot John Ferguson McLennan put it in 1863, “the divisions, the movements, and the progress of mankind”—see George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 165–66. Other early classifications favored types of religion rather than named religions; e.g., see David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), which deploys a binary “polytheism”/“monotheism” not very far from what Jonathan Smith has identified as the most basic classification of religions and groups, “theirs” vs. “ours” (see “Religion, Religions, Religious,”

increasing by two or three new religions every day.”² Whatever shifts in human life and communities might be related to these juxtaposed classifications, what is clearly paramount is that massive changes have occurred in the criteria and systems of classification themselves and in the awareness of the classifiers. Taxonomic map is not religious territory.

What is involved when we invoke the categories “religions” or “a religion” (as distinct from “religion” in the generic sense and from “the religious,” taxa with which I will not deal here)? To what extent are these categories helpfully invoked in the study of specific non-Western cultures and periods—for example, early medieval China?

In approaching these questions I will assume five axioms:

1. Discourse on religions is first and foremost a linguistic affair, whatever concepts or theories end up being invoked. We normally focus on “theories” and “methods” that operate at high levels of abstraction, but at the working end of religious studies much is decided at the more concrete level of the language in which descriptions and interpretations are couched and research questions framed. We must therefore attend closely to that language and its implications. While some have criticized the category “religions,” they have typically failed to include scrutiny of the languages both of modern scholarship and of the other cultures being studied.³

2. Language and concepts are metaphorical in character, in the sense richly developed in the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson over the past twenty years.⁴ Underlying the metaphors in which even the most

p. 276, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* [Leiden: Brill, 1978], pp. 241–42, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in “*To See Ourselves as Others See Us*”: *Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985], pp. 15–16); and Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Manual of the Science of Religion*, trans. Beatrice S. Colyer-Fergusson (London: Longmans, Green, 1981), chaps. 7–8, which deploys and discusses a variety of classification schemes.

² The statement is attributed to David B. Barrett, editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, in Toby Lester, “Oh, Gods!” *Atlantic Monthly* (February 2002), p. 38.

³ See, e.g., Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 134–42. A refreshing recent exception is Timothy Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997) 35–47, though I do not by any means agree with some of his conclusions. On the other hand, Fitzgerald’s “Religious Studies as Cultural Studies: A Philosophical and Anthropological Critique of the Concept of Religion,” *Diskus* 3 (1995): 35–47, criticizes the use of “religion” mainly for its conceptual fuzziness. I would respond that, while scholarly usage of the term is certainly vague and ambiguous by turns, the discourse on “religions” is structured according to certain prominent metaphors that are not fuzzy at all but that may be problematic in other ways, as we will see below.

⁴ See especially George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic, 1999); George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Also of note is Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke

apparently neutral descriptive statements about religions are couched will be found implications that silently but powerfully determine the questions we ask and the assumptions we make about the nature of religions.

3. Discourse about religions is rooted in Western language communities and in the history of Western cultures. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith famously argued four decades ago, it is not the case that “religion” (in either its generic or its specific sense) is simply “our word for” a universally existent entity or a universally recognized category.⁵ To speak of “religions” is to demarcate things in ways that are not inevitable or immutable but, rather, are contingent on the shape of Western history, thought, and institutions. Other cultures may, and do, lack closely equivalent demarcations.

4. Contrary to Cantwell Smith, however, I take it that the helpfulness of the category “religions” is not to be measured by the extent to which people in the target culture and era—here, early medieval China—would have recognized it as one of their own. That premodern Chinese “lacked a word for ‘religion(s),’” has been noted for almost a century now,⁶ does not, *prima facie*, constitute a reason for modern scholars not to use the term. It would do so only if one assumed that the sole legitimate task of historical scholarship on religion is to recover and repeat, in the language of the original documents, earlier people’s claims—an assumption Jonathan Z. Smith has summarized as “a morality of regard for local interpretations.”⁷ Even if such a project were desirable, it is impossible for many reasons, including the fact that the language of research is not the same as the language of the sources, necessitating translation—hence interpretation—at every turn (a responsibility abnegated by the fantasy that we might somehow simply present the texts pristine and whole to our readers), as well as the fact that, at least until time travel becomes possible, the agendas driving the questions asked and the materials selected must derive from knowledge communities contemporaneous to the scholar. As Jonathan Smith put it recently, “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purpose and

University Press, 1976). For an important set of essays that build on metaphor analysis but also suggest revisions and extensions, see James W. Fernandez, ed., *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991). Particularly important for my purposes here is the essay by Naomi Quinn, “The Cultural Basis of Metaphor” in Fernandez, ed., pp. 56–93.

⁵ See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

⁶ W. E. Soothill noted as early as 1919 that the modern Chinese term *zongjiao* [宗教] was a borrowing from Japanese and that the term had been coined recently in Japanese to translate the Western “religion” (cited in Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 58).

⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 52.

therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order . . . concept.”⁸ But use of this category without regard to whether Chinese usages work differently constitutes a sort of category blindness to aspects of the historical evidence and can enable the illusion that the category is universal and natural. This, then, leads to my final axiom.

5. That early medieval Chinese discourses lacked one-for-one “versions” of the Western category “religions” does not mean that they lacked some usages that are analogous—ones that do something like the same work, ones invoked in the sorts of contexts in which “religions” would be invoked in modern Western discourses. Hence we must pay close attention to two cultural and temporal sets of linguistic usages and their metaphorical implications, and juxtapose these results.⁹ Such an inquiry has the purpose not of ruling out Western usages simply because they are Western but of clarifying certain aspects of both members of the comparison and the nature of the differences between them, as a way of better understanding both the contours and limitations of the category “religions” and the contours and limitations of the early medieval Chinese discourses on analogous topics as well as the nature of the fit, or lack of fit, between the two. To pursue this latter goal is to stop short of affirming, with Jonathan Smith, that “comparison provides the means by which *we* ‘re-vision’ *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems,”¹⁰ at least if one of our problems is the extent to which our categories match other cultures’ and the discovery of the difference that a categorical difference makes to our (mis)understanding of them. To become aware of the peculiar shape and implications of our category “religion” is to see more

⁸ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” p. 281.

⁹ A recent work that, though not on the topic of religion(s), is exemplary in its careful attention to Chinese metaphors and the differences from Western analogues in their implications is Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002). Edward Slingerland is also doing important work in this area.

¹⁰ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, p. 52. Compare this statement in F. J. P. Poole, “Metaphors and Maps: Towards Comparison in the Anthropology of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 414–15: “Neither phenomenologically whole entities nor their local meanings are preserved in comparison”—to which I would reply that if *their* local meanings (for my purposes read: categories) are not preserved, neither will *ours* be if ours are themselves the other member of the comparison rather than being taken as the inert, fixed “third term.” It may be, as Smith points out, that sound comparisons are triadically structured (see *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 33, 51, 86–87, 99, 117), but I would insist that the “third term,” itself a culturally and historically conditioned variable, is itself likewise liable to critical modification, revision, and possible rejection as a result of the process of comparison. Perhaps this is what Smith means to allow for in his more recent comment, “So classify we must—though we can learn from the past to eschew dual classifications such as that between ‘universal’ and ‘ethnic’ or the host of related dualisms” (“A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89 [1996]: 402), to which I would simply reply that dual classifications may not, on analysis, be the only ones subject to rejection or revision.

clearly the ways in which it implicitly shapes not only the answers to our historical and interpretive questions but also the very form of those questions and, therefore, the form that any possible answer can take.

ON RELIGIONS AS ENTITIES (OF CERTAIN METAPHORICALLY
IMAGINED KINDS)

The most basic aspect of how religions are imagined in Western discourse is that they are construed as entities; they are reified. One prominent way in which Western discourse reifies religions is by the deceptively simple use of the morphological device of the English suffix “ism” and its European equivalents. By adding “ism” to a root noun or adjective that does not yet designate a religion, we form new, abstract entities, and by adding “ist” we denote things or tendencies that belong to these entities. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces “ism” to the Greek *-ismos*, a form for the nominalization of action verbs, and defines one of its chief uses as “forming the name of a system of theory or practice.” The use of such suffixes, rampant in the study of Chinese religions (where we have the big three of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) and elsewhere, amounts to a kind of shorthand, a convenient way to generalize over vast numbers of particulars.¹¹ But it is also a sleight of hand, creating in three key-strokes an entity that, in addition to its sudden existence as a thing among other things, is further implied to have the property of systematicity and therefore to be a well-integrated and clearly demarcated whole, such that aspects or parts of the whole must resemble each other more strongly than they resemble any outside aspects or parts. This “religion holism,” as I will call it, or “substantialist fallacy . . . of misplaced concreteness,” as Timothy Fitzgerald has characterized it,¹² has given rise to serious misunderstandings. As pointed out by Jonathan Smith:

To raise the issue of the setting of early Christianities [note the plural!] is to ask at the outset the question of comparison and, thereby, to deny any initial

¹¹ One scholar in the field of Chinese thought and religion who has long been admirably sensitive to such issues, as well as to the unconsidered use of such categories as “science,” “magic,” and “religion,” is Nathan Sivin. His classic article “On the Word ‘Taoist’ as a Source of Perplexity” (*History of Religions* 17 [1978]: 303–30), questioning the vague use of the taxa “Taoism” and “Taoist,” was years ahead of its time and has yet to be adequately heeded or responded to even by scholars specializing in “Daoist” studies. In his recent introduction to an older essay by Joseph Needham and Lu Gwei-Djen on the history of Chinese medicine, Sivin returns to the problems posed by such categories, observing, “These [‘isms’] are fixtures in the sorts of history of philosophy that are more interested in disembodied isms than in the activity of particular human beings” (“Editor’s Introduction,” in Joseph Needham and Lu Gwei-Djen, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6, *Biology and Biological Technology*, pt. 6, *Medicine*, ed. Nathan Sivin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], p. 8).

¹² Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion,’” p. 106.

postulation of “uniqueness.” Much will depend on the framing of the issue. The traditional vague terminology of “Early Christianity,” “Jewish,” “Gentile,” “Pagan,” “Greco-Oriental,” etc. will not suffice. Each of these generic terms denote complex plural phenomena. For purposes of comparison, they must be disaggregated and each component compared with respect to some larger topic of scholarly interest. That is to say, with respect to this or that feature, modes of Christianity may differ more significantly between themselves than between some mode of one or another Late Antique religion. The presupposition of “holism” is not “phenomenological,” it is a major, conservative, theoretical presupposition which has done much mischief in the study of religious materials, nowhere more so than in the question of Christian “origins.”¹³

Without further specification, an apparent entity named by some such name as “Daoism” seems to exist simply in a kind of contextless stasis. We can write its history, but the very form of the name suggests that “Daoism” is one unitary, perduring thing whose permutations we simply trace through time. One important line of questioning obscured by reifying and essentializing usages is that of how it happened—in an exuberance of detail befitting the intricacy of the subject—that such and such a group came to live their lives (or some aspect of their lives) differently by conforming their usage to new dictates, as well as the question of how it was understood to have happened (and portrayed as having happened) by people closer to the events. In other words, it is precisely the manifold ritual, social, institutional, rhetorical, and narrative processes at work behind such nominal forms as “Islamization,”¹⁴ “Christianization,”¹⁵ “Buddhization,” “Confucianization,”¹⁶ and “Sinification”¹⁷ that ought to be subjects of inquiry. We should ask how, not simply state that, such processes occur, but the trope of reification leaves us with few tools for doing so. At least these last-mentioned nominalizations have the virtue of implying processes by their morphology, a dynamism once suggested by the Greek root *-ismos* but now completely drained from our “isms.”

¹³ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 117–18.

¹⁴ Of which an exemplary study may be found in Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1994).

¹⁵ A sensitive study of how dying and death were gradually “Christianized” in medieval Europe and came to be performed as ritual processes differently than they had been before “Christianization” may be found in Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ See Miyakawa Hisayuki, “The Confucianization of South China,” in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 21–46.

¹⁷ Considerations of the “sinification” of “Buddhism” should now take as their starting point the pertinent reassessment of the shape of this category in Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), pp. 1–25.

So pervasive is the habit of reification that we do well to remind ourselves that “religions” do not exist as things in the world. The pertinent *res* include texts, images, and other artifacts; structures such as temples and tombs; and the people who made, used, or otherwise came into contact with these. Anything else is an idea. So, if “Daoism” or “Buddhism” are unitary, perduring things, they are so because we, possibly along with cultural others (though certainly not early medieval “Daoists” or “Buddhists,” since the English language in which it is possible to form the word “Daoism” did not yet exist), imagine and construct them as such in the ways we speak, not because they are natural existents we find in the world alongside the *res* we characterize as “belonging to” them.

Only slightly less abstract and more metaphorical are two nouns often attached to the adjective “religious” to form phrases naming the same purported entities named by the “isms,” or else to the “ists” formed from these: “tradition” and “system.” When we speak of “the Buddhist tradition” or “the system of Buddhism,”¹⁸ we seem to mean what we mean when we simply say “Buddhism,” but with emphasis on continuous transmission through time (in the first case) or on principled, organized, deliberate, and rigorous coherence (in the second).

To call a “religion,” X, “the Xist tradition,” implies a holism, unity, and continuity that ought not to be taken for granted. It does not broach the actual means of transmission; nor the content of what is transmitted; nor the changes (often dramatic) in what is transmitted; nor the hugeness of what is forgotten, or lost, or suppressed, or destroyed; nor the contestations over what is transmitted and remembered and who decides. Again, it is the actual processes and practices of remembering and transmitting that are obscured by the usage “the Xist tradition”¹⁹ and by the way of thinking about “religions” that the phrase implies.

To speak of “the Xist system” or “the system of Xism” implies—what else?—systematicity. This habit of thought and speech, rooted in Durkheim’s definition of religion and enshrined in Clifford Geertz’s famous essay first published in the mid-1960s,²⁰ continues despite postmodern attentions to fragmentation, contestation, and all that is nonsystematic in culture and religion. It is curious that when Geertz sets out to explicate the first phrase of his definition of “a religion,” which runs “a system of

¹⁸ As opposed to, e.g., “the Buddhist tradition of celebrating the Buddha’s birthday” or “the Buddhist system of transference of merit.”

¹⁹ Good resources for the study of such processes are to be found, e.g., in works such as Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), pp. 87–125; the essay was first published in 1966.

symbols which acts to,” he exclusively devotes himself to what is meant by “symbol” and says nothing whatsoever about what it means to speak of a “system” of symbols.²¹ In 1966, given the predominance of structuralist approaches, this element of the definition could simply be taken for granted. That is no longer true.

The discourse of religious “traditions” and “systems” is quasi-metaphorical at best, since “tradition” and “system” in such formulations remain highly abstract. Other forms of speech about “religions” are more metaphorically rich. My point in what follows is not to urge that we eschew metaphor entirely, for that would be impossible, but rather to urge that we become alert to the evidence-distorting and thought-limiting implications of certain particular metaphors with which we have become numbingly familiar. (In the last section I suggest alternatives.) All metaphors, like categories, highlight certain aspects of things and obscure others, thus affording us handles on complex, abstract, and unwieldy phenomena. A critique of a metaphor, then, does not consist in showing that it is somehow “wrong” but in pointing out what it hides and noting the importance, for certain purposes, of attending to these hidden aspects. What it hides might turn out to be something well worth seeing, and sometimes the hiding serves a latent ideology or set of interests, or encodes an uninvoked but silently looming model or set of expectations based on the resemblance implied in the metaphor.

RELIGIONS ARE LIVING ORGANISMS (OFTEN PLANTS)

*Taoism: Growth of a Religion*²²

In this history of Taoism I have tried . . . to show *the coherence of its development and its constant absorption and integration of outside contributions*.²³

The very first stage of Chinese Buddhism—that tiny exotic plant flowering on the ruins of the Han empire.²⁴

²¹ Note, e.g., the prominent use of “religious system,” with all of the attendant holistic tendencies, such as “A *constitution* is necessary in order that the parts or elements of the religious enterprise might function” (is there an actual “religion,” as opposed to Lease’s petri dish model, that has anything approximating a working “constitution”?) and “any religion which advances through the first two stages . . . i.e., through the meeting of the fundamental needs for which any religion arises, and through the articulation of its essence or system—will . . . advance to a final stage, . . . the claim by a religion to be able to provide a *total* understanding,” in Gary Lease, “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture: Strategies for Surviving Dissolution,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 20 (1994): 466–69, quoted passages on 463 and 469, respectively.

²² The title of the magisterial history by Isabelle Robinet, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); all italics in lists are added.

²³ Robinet, p. xv.

²⁴ Erik Zürcher, “A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts,” in *From Benares to Beijing*, ed. Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic, 1991), p. 293.

When this southern Buddhism in the course of time was blended with that of the north, we see at least *the full maturity of sinicized Buddhism*.²⁵

In the East where *it* [Manichaeism] *flourished* at a time when there were no longer any real Manichaeans to be found in the West.²⁶

Christianity itself contained astrological elements; too many traces of the Hellenistic and Oriental religions . . . were *intertwined at its very roots* for it to be able to rid itself of them completely.²⁷

At first *it* [Buddhism] *must have lived on* among the foreigners who had brought it with them from their home countries.²⁸

The Chinese Buddhist texts that on the basis of internal and external evidence may be ascribed to *the "embryonic phase" of Chinese Buddhism*.²⁹

As suggested by these few examples, authors often turn to organismic metaphors for religions when they want to portray their changing fortunes over time, their flourishing, or their decline; additionally, organismic metaphors provide a way of imagining a religion's appropriation of outside elements.

There are at least three costs to using such metaphors, however. (1) They locate agency in religion-entities themselves rather than in the people (whether individuals or groups) who participate in, support, oppose, thwart, or otherwise act to shape the nature and fortunes of the putative religion-entities in question. Religions-seen-as-organisms assume a life of their own. (2) Seen as organisms, religions take on a tacit teleology; there must be a predictable, fully mature form toward which they are striving—again quite independently of human agents. (3) Living beings, while radically dependent on their environments, are nevertheless clearly bounded entities. Even at microscopic levels there are clearly identifiable, if porous, interfaces where organisms stop and their environments start. Furthermore, living beings are holistically integrated. Foreign agents are mostly recognized as such and are quickly broken down and assimilated or expelled (or else the organism sickens and dies). Ingested food is transformed into a building block of the organism that is indistinguishable from others. And, of course, organisms have unique genetic codes that act as the master blueprints in every cell of the organism, directing all growth from a uniform structure.

²⁵ Arthur F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Robert M. Somers (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 39.

²⁶ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1987), p. 331.

²⁷ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 43.

²⁸ Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 2d ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 23.

²⁹ Zürcher, "A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts," p. 277.

In sum, seeing religions as comparable to organisms encourages us to imagine them not only as entities, but as entities of particular kinds: autonomous agents going about the business of fulfilling their developmental teleology; living beings that completely transform ingested substances into parts of themselves unrecognizable from other parts; and clearly demarcated, sharply bounded, and holistically and functionally hyperorganized life-forms, every component of which shares the same fundamental essence as every other part.³⁰ We can see what a close affinity religion organicism bears to religion holism. It should be self-evident that none of the features just listed are true of any collective human enterprise.

RELIGIONS ARE PERSONIFIED AGENTS

Where Manichaeism failed, Christianity succeeded when Constantine espoused it.³¹

*It [Manichaeism] knew how to adapt to Chinese tradition in its missionary practice.*³²

*Taoism of the middle ages saw itself as universal.*³³

*Christianity offered twice as much cultural continuity to the Hellenized Jews as to Gentiles. . . . Little need be said of the extent to which Christianity maintained cultural continuity with Judaism.*³⁴

*Daoism constructed its detailed bureaucratic arrangement only to transcend it through meditative unity with the transcendent Dao and to tease it with a celebration of eccentric immortality.*³⁵

The first example aptly illustrates the pitfalls of ascribing agency to religions-as-persons: the first two clauses of the sentence seem to imply that the two religions are autonomous actors, one of which failed and the other of which succeeded; however, the ensuing clause of the very same sentence attributes the latter religion's success to a ruler's policy. In a passage leading up to the last example, the authors make the point that "Dao-

³⁰ Reading passages based on organic metaphors for religions, one is powerfully reminded of the long Western tradition of reflection on the morphology of organic forms, enshrined in Goethe's musings on the *Urpflanze* and perhaps best summarized in E. S. Russell, *Form and Function: A Contribution to the History of Animal Morphology* (1916; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³¹ Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 76.

³² Rudolph, p. 332.

³³ Kristofer Schipper, "Purity and Strangers: Shifting Boundaries in Medieval Taoism," *T'oung Pao* 80 (1994): 63.

³⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 59.

³⁵ Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, "Introduction: Gods and Society in China," in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), p. 10.

ism” constructed elaborate bureaucratic hierarchies for the gods; now they wish to show that “Daoism” harbors anti- or extrabureaucratic types as well. This sentence is how they resolve the tension. Rather than seeing the tension between the bureaucratic and antibureaucratic as resulting from many textual and ritual skirmishes over time by multiple historical agents with multiple agendas addressing multiple contexts, we are asked to see it as the work of a single, intentional, but impersonal agent, “Daoism,” that is teleologically portrayed as doing X only to transcend X by proceeding to do Y. It is as if “Daoism” is a whimsical child at work on a sand castle or a painter addressing her canvas. The metaphor utterly obscures the actual processes that occurred to bring about the presence of such conflicting imagery and figures; it also obscures the interests and agency of the persons and groups actually responsible for them—and especially in this case one surmises that struggles over power and status were key contexts prompting the adoption of one or another idiom, bureaucratic or anti-bureaucratic, in specific situations.

RELIGIONS ARE MARKETABLE COMMODITIES

Philosophic Taoism had *lost some of its appeal*. . . Its ideas had been discussed incessantly for decades and had *lost their freshness*.³⁶

RELIGIONS ARE ARMIES; THEIR SPREAD AND SUCCESS ARE WARFARE

It [Manichaeism] could *hold its ground* even more successfully and more permanently in the East.³⁷

Buddhism was *well entrenched* in eastern Iranian areas.³⁸

The Buddhist Conquest of China

The assumption of earlier occasional *infiltrations of Buddhist elements into Tibet* is an obvious one to make.³⁹

It [Buddhism] must have slowly *infiltrated* from the North-West.⁴⁰

These last two metaphors for “religions” are not much more satisfying than the ones discussed above, but they have their advantages. The marketable commodity metaphor at least implies that persuasion is involved in religious life, that some people are trying to win others over to their

³⁶ Wright, p. 38.

³⁷ Rudolph (n. 26 above), p. 331.

³⁸ Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Parables, Hymns and Prayers from Central Asia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 5.

³⁹ Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 1. This is a secondary metaphor: the use of “infiltrate” to describe a clandestine military or intelligence-gathering maneuver stems from a primary metaphor involving liquids and the breakdown of filters designed to exclude foreign agents.

⁴⁰ Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest* (n. 28 above), pp. 22–23.

points of view; by its very structure this metaphor forces us to recall that there is a human population involved, a clientele of agents making choices, and that much is at stake in those choices. Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu, in an exceedingly rare foray into the topic of religion, makes the market metaphor the cornerstone of his approach, and the sociologist Rodney Stark has recently written a deeply market-based analysis of “the rise of Christianity.”⁴¹ The martial metaphor goes further, picturing interreligious or religious-cultural encounters as pitched battles or guerilla maneuvers.

However, like the metaphors surveyed above, both of these metaphors hide the agency of actual human beings and the issues at stake in their struggles, gathering it all up into a vague, collectivized “ism.” What Bruce Lincoln has recently observed of the treatment of stories classified under the taxon “myth” applies also to this sort of usage: “Myth is often treated as an anonymous and collective product, in which questions of authorship are irrelevant. Lévi-Strauss has done this in a most sophisticated and challenging fashion, treating myth as a logical structure that essentially writes itself, variants being the product of an impersonal process whereby that structure explores its own variables until exhausting the available possibilities. Such a view alleviates the frustration of those who seek authors and ‘original versions’ of mythical texts, but the price for this is unacceptably high, since it drains agency from the act of narration.”⁴²

There are other key metaphors for religions, which I will mention only in passing: *religions are substances* (usually liquid or viscous, with the common tropes being spread, influence [on which more below], and diffusion); *religions are containers* (of people, ideas, trends, artifacts, and values); *religions are the contents of cultures, societies, nations, or groups that are containers* (leading to several unhelpful but commonly used ways of narrating the passage of religions across cultures and societies); and *religions are buildings*.

Now, all such usages occur when scholars want to speak at a high level of generality and abstraction, and at such levels their use is perhaps inevitable. Some such constructions, in some contexts, are perhaps quite harmless or trivial. It is admittedly hard to arrive at alternatives that allow one to make generalizations of any kind; metaphors reduce complex, messy phenomena by analogies to things simpler and more familiar, and at times we understandably turn to them for the verbal and conceptual economy they offer. (It is impossible, for example, to imagine writing a

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, “Genèse et structure du champ religieux,” *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971): 295–334; Stark.

⁴² Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 149. Compare the similar statement about shifts in the meanings of words on p. 18.

short encyclopedia entry on the historical relationship between two traditions without frequent recourse to such constructions.) And in singling out a few sentences from some colleagues' works I do not by any means suggest that I myself have successfully eschewed such expressions in my own writings, although in my most recent book I do attempt alternative strategies whose success I leave for others to judge.⁴³ But we use such locutions at the price of positioning ourselves to forget about some of the most important human aspects of the historical processes we seek to understand and portray. That is a very high price to pay.

SOME EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINESE METAPHORS

Do we find anything in early medieval Chinese discourses remotely analogous to Western patterns of discourse on "religions," and if so, what predominant metaphors are at work and what are their implications?

Below I provide a mere sampling of statements drawn from a small number of texts; this is an area that warrants much more research, and my findings are preliminary. Along the way I will also comment on how Western translators have dealt with such passages.

1. FOUNDER OR PARAGON SYNECDOCHE

The names, partial names, or titles of founding or paradigmatic figures are sometimes used synecdochally to refer nominally to what in Western discourse would be called an entire "religion" or "tradition." For example, Wei Shou [魏收] (506–72), compiler of an official history of the Toba Wei (the *Wei shu*), included a section on religion titled *Shi Lao zhi* [釋老志]—usually translated "Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism," but the *Shi* and *Lao* of the title are truncations of the names of Śākyamuni and Laozi. A similar usage occurs in the title of what we might term a "lineage" or "school" of texts, ideas, and practices, *Huang Lao* [黃老], short for Huangdi [黃帝], the Yellow Thearch (a figure of ancient myth), and Laozi, putative author of the *Daodejing* and (in some circles) cosmic deity. This type of synecdoche is also seen not in titles but in the context of ongoing discourse:

佛淪廢

Literally, "the ruination and rejection of Buddha," but the context clearly requires that we understand *fo* as gathering up and nominalizing the whole set of

⁴³ See the brief discussion in Robert Ford Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 6–8.

phenomena we would habitually call “Buddhism” (Leon Hurvitz translates, “The Buddhist suppression . . .”).⁴⁴

周孔即佛佛即周孔，蓋外內名之耳。

“[The Duke of] Zhou and Confucius are identical with the Buddha, the Buddha with [the Duke of] Zhou and Confucius. This is merely to name them with respect to outer and inner.”⁴⁵

2. “WAY” OR “PATH” (DAO [道] AND ITS COMPOUNDS)

In early medieval Chinese discourse, probably the most ubiquitous way of nominalizing what we would call “religions” was to speak of one or multiple “ways” or “paths”—one or more *dao* [道]. I begin with the treatise, in dialogue format, known as the *Mouzi lihuo lun* [牟子理惑論] (“Master Mou’s Treatise for the Removal of Doubts”), by an unknown author.⁴⁶ When, as rarely in this text, it is a matter of the foreign what-we-would-call-religion nominalized, and it is uncertain what its particular practices, values, or scriptures are, the term used in every case is “the *dao*—way or path—of Buddha” (*fodao* [佛道]). The term first occurs in the question: “If the *dao* of Buddha is so venerable, why did not Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius practice (*xiu* [修]) it?”⁴⁷ (John P. Keenan renders *fodao* here as “the Way of the Buddha”; Erik Zürcher simply translates it as “Buddhism,” an understandable choice, but one that masks the Chinese metaphor and its difference from the Western “ism.”)⁴⁸ Elsewhere the interlocutor asks why, since the people who constituted the intellectual and cultural paragons of society at the time—the “forest of classicists” (*rulin* [儒林], *ru* being a designation often translated as “Confucians” [a habit that merits reconsideration])⁴⁹—did not regard the

⁴⁴ The Chinese text with Hurvitz’s translation appear in Leon Hurvitz, trans., “Wei Shou, Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism: An English Translation of the Original Chinese Text of Wei-shu CXIV and the Japanese Annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryū,” in Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio, *Unkō sekkutsu no kenkyū*, 16:68–69 (Kyoto: Kyoto University Research Institute for Humanistic Sciences, 1951–56).

⁴⁵ Sun Chuo [孫綽] (ca. 300–380 C.E.), *Yudao lun* [喻道論] (“Essay in Clarification of the Path [or Way]”), T 2102, 52:17a. Here and throughout, texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon are referred to as follows: the number following the letter T indicates the serial number assigned to the text in the Taishō edition (Tokyo: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō, 1924–35), and the numbers following the comma indicate the volume and (after the colon) the page, register(s), and (in some cases) line numbers of the passage in question.

⁴⁶ On the uncertain provenance of this text, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, pp. 13–15; for a recent translation and study, see John P. Keenan, *How Master Mou Removes Our Doubts: A Reader-Response Study and Translation of the Mou-tzu Li-huo lun* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994).

⁴⁷ T 2102, 52:2b26.

⁴⁸ Keenan, p. 79; Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, p. 265.

⁴⁹ For a recent and well-informed discussion of the significance of this term in early texts, see Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 2n., and 364–65.

“*dao* of Buddha” as venerable during his visit there, Master Mou holds it in such high esteem.⁵⁰

The term *dao* is also used to summarily nominalize multiple “ways” in the following passage:

道皆無爲一也。子何以分別羅列云其異乎。

“In both the *daos* it is a single ‘intentionless action.’ Why then do you discriminate and rank them, saying they [the *daos*] are different?”⁵¹

Or, in the modern Western idiom: both Daoism and Buddhism employ the concept, value, and terminology of “intentionless action” (the famous *wuwei*); why then do you assert that Daoism and Buddhism are different paths and that the latter is superior? The implied author, Master Mou, goes on to pose analogies with the uses of the terms “vegetation” and “metal”: things may belong in common to these genera, but they differ at the level of species. He then clinches the analogy with this line: “If this is so of the myriad things, how can *daos* alone [be different]?” (Keenan renders *dao* in the first question above as “teachings,” while rendering the latter one as “doctrines,” both of which hide the Chinese metaphor implicit in *dao* and set up a too-easy equivalence between it and the familiar Western tendency to reduce religions to “doctrines.”)⁵²

In Wei Shou’s treatise we find such usages as the following:

此則佛道流通之漸也

“This, then, was the modest beginning of the influx of the Way of the Buddha.”⁵³

桓帝時襄楷言佛陀黃老道

“In the time of Emperor Huan, [Xiang Kai] spoke of the Way of Buddha, the Yellow Emperor, and [Laozi].”⁵⁴

素敬佛道

“[He] had always honored the Way of Buddha.”⁵⁵

Of course, *fodao* was also the expression of choice for denoting more specifically the path to enlightenment established by the Buddha, a set of teachings and practices more delimited than the more general usage seen

⁵⁰ T 2102, 52:5c12.

⁵¹ T 2102, 52:6b15.

⁵² Keenan, pp. 157–58.

⁵³ Quoting the translation of Hurvitz (n. 44 above), pp. 26–27.

⁵⁴ Again quoting *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Once again quoting *ibid.*, p. 66.

above, where *fodao* is clearly being used to nominalize the entirety of what we in English would refer to as “Buddhism.”⁵⁶

In the year 340 C.E., the officials Yu Bing [庾冰] and He Chong [何充] debated the issue of whether the Buddhist *sangha* was autonomous with respect to the polity.⁵⁷ Both He, defending the pro-Buddhist position, and Yu, arguing that monks were obliged to perform obeisance to the ruler, use the term *shendao* [神道] (divine path, or path to divinity, or way of spirits) in both the singular and plural to nominalize bodies of practice that seem analogous to what is meant by “religion(s).” (Zürcher, again ignoring the metaphoric structure of such an expression, renders *shendao* as “spiritual doctrine.”)

夫萬方殊俗神道難辯

“The myriad quarters differ in their customs; their *shendao* are hard to distinguish.”⁵⁸

且興自漢世迄于今日，雖法有隆衰而弊無妖忘，神道經久未有比也

“Moreover, from its first appearance in Han times down to the present, although the Law [see the section below on this metaphor] has alternately flourished and decayed it has not been spoiled by bogus and wanton [practices]. As a *shendao* it has lasted longer than any other.”⁵⁹

Again, as in the case of *fodao*, these uses of *shendao* are exceptional. The term’s more standard meanings in religious discourses include the paths of rebirth as spirits as opposed to humans,⁶⁰ the way of serving spirits, a way of characterizing a religious path or method as superior,⁶¹ or the inscription-lined pathway leading to a prominent person’s tomb.

In the fifth-century Celestial Master scripture *Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens* (*Santian neijie jing* [三天內解經]), which offers a mythic “history” of what we would term “religions” in China up until its

⁵⁶ A computer-assisted search of the Chinese Buddhist canon turns up over 7,300 instances of the term *fodao*, the overwhelming majority of which exhibit this narrower usage.

⁵⁷ For the political as well as ideological background of the debate, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest* (n. 28 above), pp. 106–10, and for a translation of the documents see pp. 160–63. See also Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, *Das Hung-Ming Chi und die Aufnahme des Buddhismus in China* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), pp. 53 ff.; and Tsukamoto Zenryū, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism: From Its Introduction to the Death of Hui-yüan*, trans. Leon Hurvitz (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985), 1:340 ff.

⁵⁸ T 2102, 52:79b26.

⁵⁹ T 2102, 52:80a3–5. The statements are repeated in another compilation, T 2036, 49:520c–521a.

⁶⁰ As in statements such as: “The paths of humans and of spirits are different” (T 2122, 53:521b13), and “Among [those on] the paths of ghosts and spirits there is also eating, but one cannot attain satiety” (T 2082, 51:792c14).

⁶¹ As in the statement, “The way of Buddha (*fodao*) is a divine way (*shendao*)” (T 2121, 53:81b).

own time, religious plurality is similarly a matter of various *daos*, and central to the scripture's agenda—as we will see below—is to narrate the history of these *daos*' interrelationships so as to clarify their respective statuses and identities (and so as to privilege the one championed by the scripture's authors). We find such statements as the following:

因出三道以教天民... 此時六天治興，三道教行

"At this time, he [Lord Lao] issued the Three Ways to instruct the people of heaven. . . . At that time, the rule of the Six Heavens flourished and the Three Ways and Teachings were put into practice."⁶²

These "Three Ways" are not the "Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism" familiar from textbooks on Chinese religions over the past century but "the Great Way of Intentionless Action" (*wuwei dadao* [無爲大道]), "the Way of Buddha" (*fodao* [佛道]), and "the Great Way of the Pure Contract" (*qingyue dadao* [清約大道]).

Later, after narrating the Buddha's birth, the text observes:

佛道於此而更興焉

"At this, the Way of Buddha flourished once more."⁶³

Then, in its version of the most common story of how the "way of Buddha" was introduced to China—that of the dream of Han Emperor Ming—the scripture observes:

群臣解夢言是佛真而遣人入西國寫取佛經。因作佛圖塔寺遂布流中國，三道交錯。於是人民雜亂，中外相混，各有攸尚

"His officials interpreted this dream to mean that this was the perfected form of the Buddha, so they sent envoys into the Western Kingdoms to copy and bring back Buddha scriptures. Then [or: because of this] they built Buddha stūpas and temples, and so [the Way of Buddha? Buddha stūpas and temples?] covered and spread across the Central Kingdom, and the Three Ways intermingled and became confused. As a result, the people became mixed and disordered;

⁶² HY 11096, 1:3a. Here and throughout, texts in the *Zhengtong daoze* (the Daoist canon of the *zhengtong* reign period [1436–49]) are cited by their serial number in Wang Tsuchien, ed., *Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature*, Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series no. 25 (Beijing: Yanjing University, 1925), abbreviated as HY, followed by fascicle and folio page numbers. The translation given here is that of Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 209, except that I have capitalized differently to conform with passages below and have added "and Teachings" in the last phrase. An alternate rendition of the last clause would be: "and the Three Ways were taught and put into practice."

⁶³ HY 1196, 1:4b, slightly emending Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 212.

those of the Center mingled with outsiders, and each had his own particular object of veneration.”⁶⁴

There is an odd vagueness as to the intended subject of the second sentence: perhaps it is the “way of Buddha,” or perhaps the “Buddha stūpas and temples,” that are said to have “covered and spread across the Central Kingdom.” In any case, flourishing, covering and spreading an area (perhaps), intermingling and becoming confused: these are the actions, and the only actions, attributed to *daos*.⁶⁵

Elsewhere, in a passage lamenting people’s tendency to continue “re-vering” or “upholding” (*feng* [奉]) *daos* for which there is no longer any need, we read:

今有奉五斗米道者又有奉無爲旛花之道及佛道,此皆是六天故事悉已被廢

“Today, though there are some who revere the “Way of Five Pecks of Rice,” there are others who uphold the “[Way of] Intentionless Action” and the “Way of Banners and Flowers,” which follows the Way of Buddha. All of these [deviant ways] are old matters of the Six Heavens. All have been abolished!”⁶⁶

Finally, when this scripture wants to indicate that multiple “ways” have a common source, it resorts to a different metaphor commonly used in Chinese discourses for this purpose: that of trunk or root versus branch.

蓋三道同根而異支者...此三道同是太上老君之法而教化不同,大歸於眞道

“Now the three Ways are but different branches extending from the same root. . . . These three Ways are equally methods of the Most High Lord Lao, though they differ in their teachings and transformative effects. All three find their source in the true Way.”⁶⁷

What are the implications of the *dao* metaphor? Although many scriptures of Celestial Master, Shangqing, and Lingbao provenance personify *dao* as an ultimate cosmic deity or force with wishes and commandments for humanity, such is not its sense in the contexts under survey here; it is used rather to nominalize things that seem analogous to what we would

⁶⁴ HY 1196, 1:5b, partially quoting but emending Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, pp. 214–15, to provide a more literal reading.

⁶⁵ I note what seems to be an unexpected whiff of Tillichian “ultimate concern” in the unusual expression *youshang* [攸尚] in the last line of the passage—the normal sense of *you* being “to concern oneself with” and that of *shang* being (here) “uppermost.”

⁶⁶ HY 1196, 1:7a, modifying Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 218, in the direction of increased literalness.

⁶⁷ HY 1196, 1:9b, slightly modifying Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, p. 222.

call “religions.” It does so by imagining them as paths. Imagined as the objects of human agents’ actions, paths may be issued, set forth, laid down, upheld, followed, strayed or deviated from, or lost,⁶⁸ or the wrong path may be taken; imagined as agents, they may deviate or be correct, they may flourish or decline, or they may remain distinct or become intermingled and confused. These are very weak senses of agency, and they are nonorganic. “Path” metaphors are, however, rather holistic in at least two senses: a path, unless broken, runs continuously from beginning to end, whether it divides or rejoins, and it is not possible for an individual to walk-practice (the double sense of a common verb in such contexts, *xing* [行]) more than one path at a time unless the paths have merged to form one. But note, finally, that people’s relation to *daos* is not one of passive containment, membership, or sheer belonging. People seek, travel, follow, abandon, or deviate from *daos*, rather than simply being contained in them; the verbs are verbs of doing, not copulae.⁶⁹

3. “LAW,” “METHOD[S],” OR “REGULATIONS” (*fa* [法])

Another common nominalizing idiom, used more often to refer to what we would term “Buddhism” than to “Daoism” (but also used for the latter as well), is the use of the term *fa* [法], alone or (like *dao*) in compounds. In translations of imported scriptures this term was (like *dao*) often employed as a technical equivalent of the Sanskrit *dharma*, but in contexts such as the ones collected here its use is clearly more generalizing than that, referring to the sum total of teachings, communities, institutions, and practices associated with the Indian sage.

All of the following instances are drawn from Wei Shou’s sixth-century treatise. In each, it clearly seems that *fa* is meant not in the limited and rather technical sense of the teaching attributed to the Buddha’s discovery and teaching but in a much broader sense approximating what is meant by “Buddhism” in modern discourses.

於是法旨大著中原

“Hereupon the essence of the Law was greatly manifested in the Middle Plain.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ For example, the expression *midao* [迷道], meaning “to lose one’s way,” “a misguided way,” “a path taken by those who are misguided,” “a path of confusion,” etc., depending on context, appears almost a hundred times in the Taishō canon.

⁶⁹ The path metaphor, fundamental to Buddhist discourse, is so richly developed in that tradition that some have called for its appropriation as a cross-cultural category, in part as a corrective to the tendency to use Western-derived categories to analyze non-Western societies but not the reverse. See Robert E. Buswell, Jr., and Robert M. Gimello, “Introduction,” in *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert E. Buswell and Robert M. Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 1–9.

⁷⁰ Hurvitz (n. 44 above), p. 50.

亦好 黃老又崇佛法

“He both loved the Yellow Thearch and Lao[zi] and held highly the Law of Buddha.”⁷¹

經毀法時猶自全立

“Throughout the time of persecution of the Law it [a stone *vihara* with an image over the tomb of the monk Huishi] still stood whole.”⁷²

佛法之滅

“When the Law of Buddha was suppressed. . . .”⁷³

The reader will further recall the statement already extracted above from the *Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens*, a reminder that *fa* was used not only to nominalize the repertoire of practices and understandings imported from India and Central Asia:

此三道同是太上老君之法

“These three Ways are equally methods [or laws] of the Most High Lord Lao.”

The *fa* metaphor is synecdochal, reducing the totality of aspects of what we would call a “religion” to one aspect. But that aspect is not creedal, as it typically is in the West, but rather praxeological, a set of norms or regulations—implying, first and foremost, regulations concerning what to do. Very seldom is agency of any kind attributed to *fas*, and, to my knowledge, they are never personified.

4. “THE TEACHINGS OF X” (X [之] 教)

At some point in the modern era, probably (in Chinese) as a back-formation from a Japanese neologism that, like the Japanese *shūkyō* (Chinese *zongjiao* [宗教]), was created to translate “religions” and its equivalents in other European languages, writers of Japanese and Chinese began to use expressions of the form “X *jiao*” to denote what Euro-Americans were calling “religions.” Thus, *dōkyō/daojiao* [道教], literally “the teaching[s] of or about the *dao*,” was used in contexts where “Daoism” would be used in Western discourses; similarly *bukkyō/fojiao* [佛教] for “Buddhism” and (less commonly) *rujiao* [儒教] for “Confucianism.” Now, as Cantwell Smith and others noted long ago, premodern Chinese discourse almost completely lacks this formulation used in this way. In the Chinese Buddhist canon, for example, one finds over four thousand instances of the juxtaposition of the terms *fo* and *jiao*, but more than ninety-nine percent

⁷¹ Modifying *ibid.*, p. 52. We also see “founder synecdoche” here.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

of these simply mean something like “the Buddha taught” or “the Buddha’s teaching [that].” Only with extreme rarity do such compounds seem to gather up and nominalize everything that one might mean in Euro-American discourse by a term such as “Buddhism,” and even when one does find such cases, the ambiguity of the syntax usually permits other, nonreifying readings.

One such instance appears in the perhaps early fourth century *Treatise for the Rectification of Unjust Criticism* (*Zhengwu lun* [正誣論]) by an unknown author:⁷⁴

夫佛教率以慈仁⁷⁵

Arthur Link translates: “Buddhism guides men by means of compassion and love,”⁷⁶ taking the string *fojiao* as the compound subject of the sentence and rendering it in its modern sense. But, taking the string as subject and verb, one could alternatively translate: “The Buddha taught and led by means of compassion and humaneness.” Even if one insists on reading *fojiao* as a nominal compound, it would surely be better to render the sentence along the lines of “The Buddha’s teaching leads by means of compassion and humaneness.”

Western translators sometimes render *jiao* as “doctrine” (or, as we have seen, they render a compound meaning “the teaching of X,” even more distortively as “Xism”). But the meaning of the term emphasizes not—unlike “doctrine” (with its basis in *doxa*)—the attitude of the “believer” but the source of the teaching, the one who taught it, or else (in cases like *mingjiao* [名教] “the teaching of names”⁷⁷) what it is a teaching about. *Jiaos* are not personified, and only seldom is any agency metaphorically attributed to them (although the *Zhengwu lun* statement might constitute an exception); normally teachers are portrayed as bringing about certain effects in people by means of teachings, rather than teachings somehow acting of themselves.

5. METAPHORS FOR THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE THINGS SO IMAGINED

A full treatment of the subject under discussion here would include attention to metaphors for the relationships among metaphorically construed, plural “religion”-like entities in Chinese discourses as well as among “religions” in Western discourses. Here I will merely sketch a

⁷⁴ See Zürcher (n. 28 above), p. 15; Arthur E. Link, “Cheng-wu lun: The Rectification of Unjustified Criticism,” *Oriens Extremis* 8 (1961): 136–65; and Tsukamoto (n. 57 above), pp. 178–79.

⁷⁵ T 2102, 52:8c17–18.

⁷⁶ Link, p. 160.

⁷⁷ On the sense of this term in the early medieval period, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, pp. 86–87.

few preliminary observations on another topic on which more research is needed.

As noted above, one common Chinese metaphor for showing the co-belonging of two bodies of tradition is the organic imagery of root and branch. Other, nonorganic metaphors work similarly to say three things at once: (1) the two (or more) things are in some ultimate sense really the same; (2) their differences are merely matters of relative location or function; and (3) one of the things in question is usually suggested to be the superior member of the dyad, triad, and so on—in other words, although the assertion of sameness appears benign or generous, often the metaphor effectively casts the interrelationships among the plural things as hierarchical.

One of these other metaphors portrays the relationship between two bodies of teaching as one of “inner” and “outer,” usually with the understanding that inner is the hierarchically superior position. We already saw this dyad in one of the statements illustrating “founder synecdoche” quoted above:

周孔即佛佛即周孔，蓋外內名之耳

“[The Duke of] Zhou and Confucius are identical with the Buddha, the Buddha with [the Duke of] Zhou and Confucius. *This is merely to name them with respect to outer and inner.*”⁷⁸

The language of that which is “outside the realm (or the quarters)” versus that which is “inside the realm,” *fangwai* [方外] and *fangnei* [方內], pervaded early medieval polemical discourses, and here it was the outer position that was conceded to be superior. This dyad is used in Sun Chuo’s [孫綽] (ca. 300–380 C.E.) *Yudao lun* [喻道論], and we find it sprinkled throughout the apologetic writings of the Buddhist monk Huiyuan and of his anticlerical interlocutors.⁷⁹ This terminology had a pedigree stretching back to a passage in the “Inner Chapters” of the *Zhuangzi* (ca. 320 B.C.E.), in which Confucius, here a mouthpiece for Zhuangzi, characterizes people who pay no attention to proper ritual and custom, freeing themselves from convention and taking the fashioner of things as their

⁷⁸ T 2102, 52:17a, emphasis added.

⁷⁹ On the *Yudao lun*, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, pp. 132–33; Schmidt-Glintzer (n. 57 above), pp. 59 ff.; and Arthur E. Link and Tim Lee, “Sun Cho’s *Yü-tao-lun*: A Clarification of the Way,” *Monumenta Serica* 25 (1966): 169–96. Examples in Huiyuan’s and his interlocutors’ discourses include T 2102, 52:30b6 (“One who has gone forth from the household is a ‘guest from beyond the realm’”—cf. 75a20), 34c20, 84a11, and 84b8. Zürcher (*Buddhist Conquest*, p. 98) observes that a noted monk was characterized as a “gentleman from beyond the world” (*fangwai zhi shi*)—not because he was of foreign origin (he was not) but because he was in touch with things “from beyond the realm.” The hierarchical effect is very clear in such statements as “How could matters from beyond the realm possibly be embodied within the realm?” (79c5).

companion, as wandering “beyond the realm” or “beyond the guidelines” (*fangwai*) as opposed to inferior types such as Confucius, who here confesses himself doomed to remain “within the realm” (*fangnei*).⁸⁰ Early translators of Buddhist sutras often used *fangwai* to characterize the goal of Buddhist practice.

Another early medieval strategy for asserting that two traditions, despite many surface-level differences, are at a deeper level actually the same was to speak in terms of “traces” or “footprints” (*ji* [跡] or [迹]). Sun Chuo, for example, asserts that both sets of sages, “Confucian” and “Buddhist,” were alike “awakened” or “enlightened” (*jue* [覺]) and that although they left different “traces” in their teachings and practices, “that by which they left traces” (*qi suo yi ji zhe* [其所以跡者]) was the same state of “awakenedness.”⁸¹ The visible differences in teaching and practice are thus made to seem trivial—though they were hardly trivial to the authors who left records of debates between rival proponents. Once again the pedigree for this strategy stretches back to the *Zhuangzi*.⁸²

Finally, various binary classifications—left-right, yin-yang, life-death—were employed simultaneously to link and hierarchically distinguish traditions. The *Celestial Master Scripture of the Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens* offers a cosmologically and mythologically rich example of this trope. The scripture begins by characterizing the pneumas (*qi* [氣]) of the Central Kingdom (i.e., civilized “China”) as yang and those of the outer barbarian kingdoms as yin; people living in yin areas, we are told, require extremely strict prohibitions. Later we read:

Laozi is the lord of living transformation; Śākyamuni is the lord of transformation by death. As a result, Laozi was born from his mother’s left armpit and is lord of the left. The left is the side of the yang breaths that govern the Azure Palace with its Registers of Life. Śākyamuni was born from his mother’s right armpit and is lord of the right. The right is the side of yin breaths and the black records of the Registers of Death. In this respect the differences between the teachings of Laozi and Śākyamuni are those between the laws of left and right [是以老子釋迦教化左右法異].⁸³

Despite this clear dichotomy, the same scripture, as we saw above, asserts that “each path in the end returns without distinction to the True Way.”

⁸⁰ The passage appears in the sixth chapter; for alternate translations, see Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 83; and A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: Mandala/HarperCollins, 1991), p. 89. For a later Buddhist author’s comment on this hierarchical taxonomy, which explicitly traces it to the *Zhuangzi*, see T 2126, 54:247a.

⁸¹ T 2102, 52:17a13–14. See also Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, pp. 91, 133.

⁸² See Graham, p. 133; and Campy, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth* (n. 43 above), p. 201.

⁸³ HY 1196, 1:9b; Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (n. 62 above), pp. 222–23.

The “way of Buddha,” having been safely classified as inferior yet necessary for softening the tough nature of barbarians in outlying lands, may be ascribed to the same originating force as this scripture’s own tradition.

6. ON “BELIEF” AND “BELIEVERS”: AN EXCURSUS

It is well known that Western discourses on “religions” commonly take belief—an inward assent to doctrinal propositions or else lists of such propositions themselves—as their key defining feature. Hence “belief” and “faith” become synecdoches for religions in general, and participants are summarily labeled as “believers.” This complex of assumptions is strikingly absent from Chinese discourses, at least in the early medieval period. For one thing, the actual topics of debates among rival proponents for the most part concern practices and values, not propositions or doctrines and not people’s inner attitudes toward these (which is not to say that matters of mental attitude were ignored in Chinese religious texts and practices).⁸⁴ And for another, when the term *xin* [信]—the closest analogue to “believe” or “belief”—is used, it usually connotes not assent to propositions but trust or confidence in a teaching, method, or path. On this point, the following passage from *Mouzi lihuo lun* is instructive:

子訕神仙抑奇怪, 不信有不死之道是也, 何爲獨信佛道當得度世乎

“You slander the divine transcendents, repress the wondrous and anomalous, and do not believe [or trust] that there is a *dao* of not dying. Why do you believe that only by the *dao* of Buddha can one attain deliverance from the world? [or, why do you trust exclusively in the way of Buddha as a means for delivering oneself from the world?]⁸⁵

⁸⁴ An easy way to confirm this statement is to scan the content of the questions posted to “Master Mou” by his interlocutor in the *Mouzi lihuo lun*. They include such matters as these: How can you speak so differently from Confucius and still take our indigenous classics seriously? Why are the Buddhist scriptures so lengthy when compared with the Chinese classics? Why did the Buddha’s body have thirty-two marks? Why must monks shave their heads and practice celibacy, practices that go against the value of filiality (in that filiality dictates that one’s body is the legacy of the family and must not be willfully injured or diminished, as well as that one must produce lineage heirs)? Why must monks wear such strange clothing and beg for their food? Why must Buddhists value renunciation and giving over the accumulation of resources and taking pleasure in sumptuousness? Why does Buddha prohibit the eating of meat while permitting the eating of grain (contrary to one understanding of longevity regimens at the time)? The only strictly doctrinal question that I can find in the treatise is the one concerning rebirth.

⁸⁵ T 2102, 52:6b27–28. In my judgment, Keenan (p. 161) errs in his translation of both key phrases: “refuse to *believe* in a way to avoid death [emphasis added]” misses the syntactical force the verb *you* [有] (here, “that there exists”) has in the Chinese; “believe that only the Buddha Tao can save the world” is a possible translation, but in such contexts *dushi* [度世] usually indicates not what “the *dao* of Buddha” will do to the world but what the practitioner can do for himself by means of “the *dao* of Buddha.”

Even, as here, when it seems to be a question of “belief,” what is indicated by the term is not affirmation or denial of a set of propositional doctrines but confidence in one way of attaining an ultimate goal and lack of confidence in another way.⁸⁶

Finally, when it comes to speaking of the “members” of “religions,” or “believers” (as Western discourse tends to frame things), in early medieval Chinese there is a suffix, *zhe* [者], which works somewhat similarly to the English *-ist* and its equivalent European forms. But the crucial differences are that *zhe* follows only verbs or verbal phrases (so that nothing equivalent to the simple “Buddhist” or “Daoist” is possible) and that there is no invocation of “belief”—the range of verbs is much wider. In sum, the language tends to emphasize practice or some mode of active participation rather than either simple membership in a container-like set or assent to a set of core doctrines.

What can we conclude from this survey?

1. We do find a tendency in early medieval Chinese texts—especially in certain types of contexts (as will be seen in the next section)—to refer nominally to entities that seem to correspond roughly to the ones named “religions” in Western discourse. This nominalization implies reification, though the degree of reification is perhaps less than it is in Western discourse.

2. Only seldom are these entities metaphorically pictured as agents; normally it is people (individuals or groups) who are spoken of as doing things with respect to the entities. With very rare exceptions, verbs of action attributed to the entities are intransitive verbs and connote things like flourishing, declining, or spreading.

3. Although we do find nominalization, weak reification, and metaphorical construction of general entities roughly corresponding to our “religions,” the metaphors are different and carry different implications. We might speculate that the differences correspond to, or translate into, differences in how people have actually participated in what we would call their “religions” in the two contexts of early medieval China and early modern Europe, in much the way that Lakoff and Johnson suggest Westerners live in time differently than they otherwise might because they imagine time as money. It is one thing, for example, to imagine that one is traveling on a way, another thing to imagine that one is comprised in a container; it is one thing to picture a way or a teaching “spreading”

⁸⁶ Even in many Western contexts, one suspects that such a statement would hold true. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) exemplifies an approach to the vexed question of “belief” that is commensurate with the complexity of people’s actual relations to the stories and assertions current in their cultures, a welcome improvement over the on/off toggle-switch approach usually taken.

or “flowing” across a terrain, another to imagine an army fighting a war on hostile territory.

4. The way in which *daos*, and so on, are spoken of in Chinese texts by no means implies that they are total, thought-encompassing “systems” in the sense of conceptual frameworks, unlike the way in which “religions” have often been pictured in Western discourse. Chinese texts assume that what we term “religions” are fully commensurable and easily mappable one to another, even when they are as sharply differentiated as *fangwai* versus *fangnei*. Nor do the Chinese metaphors imply the high degree of holistic integration implied by the Western organic metaphors. The *dao* metaphor does, however, entail a degree of teleology—not so much with regard to the inevitable direction of the history or development through time of the *dao* itself as with regard to the goal of the practitioner who “practices” or “walks” it.

5. We would be better served by translations (when they are possible) that preserve the metaphors structuring Chinese discourse than ones that directly map a term such as *fodao*, “the way of Buddha,” onto the English “Buddhism” and its Western-language equivalents.

We must go further, however, to consider the typical sorts of contexts in which such nominalizing, reifying, metaphorical constructions are called for in the first place.

CONTEXTS OF REIFICATION AND METAPHORICAL CONSTRUCTION

Even from the brief survey just conducted, it is evident that Cantwell Smith cannot have been right to say that “Fundamentally it is the outsider who names a religious system. It is the observer who conceptualizes a religion as a denotable existent.”⁸⁷ Such conceptualizations do not depend on whether the speaker is a religious “insider” or “outsider,” as I have argued elsewhere in the case of “theoretical” analyses of ritual.⁸⁸

However, Cantwell Smith was astute to note that “religion as a systematic entity, as it emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a concept of polemics and apologetics”⁸⁹ and that “religions” tend to be given names and treated as entities when cultural boundaries are crossed and when multiple, rival, or new traditions are encountered. It is a likely hypothesis, argued by Cantwell Smith and ripe for further research, that the tendency to nominalize and reify “religions,” *daos*, *jiaos*, and so on, and to conceive of them in metaphorically specific ways are

⁸⁷ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (n. 5 above), p. 129.

⁸⁸ Robert Ford Campany, “Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice,” in *Discourse and Practice*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 197–231; repr. in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), pp. 86–103.

⁸⁹ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 43.

most in evidence where there is heightened awareness of religious plurality and difference—and therefore also, very often, religious rivalry and competition for resources, patronage, and prestige, with attendant attempts to classify and narrate so as to bring some conceptual and rhetorical order to the confusing field of players. Early medieval China and early modern Europe were two such contexts.

In a social context in which there is but one predominant way of doing the important things of life, religious practices themselves, to some extent, define or create their own communities. They do so for this simple reason: people must come together to do these practices and to learn how to do them; there is, in other words, a relatively low quotient of “imaginedness” in these communities.⁹⁰ Even in early times, such social environments were probably much rarer than we often think, for most human groups are at least aware of others on their margins who do things differently. In contexts where such differences become acute, where religious plurality is not only evident but also the locus of some particular problems, nominalizations and reifications (one or another “ism,” *fodao*, or, at an even more abstract, generic level, “religions”) begin to be invoked. In early medieval China, as probably in most other such contexts, it was the attempt to negotiate such differences that created the need for reification in the first place.

The point is simple but bears elaboration. Metaphorical expressions that gather up multiple texts, ideas, practices, and persons and picture them as a “path” or a “teaching” are used in contrastive situations, where a difference is being encountered and negotiated. This is so even in a text such as Wei Shou’s *Shilao zhi*, where we have the story told of how the alien teachings and practices of the Śākya sage were introduced to the Central Realm—how the foreign practices and ideas came to be imported into “China,” and how “Chinese” responded. It is much more obviously the case in a treatise that takes the form of the *Mouzi lihuo lun*, with its litany of requests for explanation and justification of strange, foreign practices and understandings, or a scripture like the *Santian neijie jing*, a cosmogonic-mythic narrative reframing of religious difference. Absent a startling difference that demands to be accounted for, the nominalizations and metaphoric imagery of such texts would be largely unnecessary; the texts arise at the boundaries and borders between one set of teachings-practices and another, and they are always framed from the point of view of someone who, even when favoring one side over the other, writes as if it is possible to weigh both on the same scale and implies that two (or more) particular things are members of a common genus. Such situations,

⁹⁰ In the sense specified by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed. (London: Versa, 1991).

of course, involve contestation, and authors' stances are not neutral, even when, as we have seen, they assert the ultimate nondistinction of two or more "paths."

One other point bears making here, though its development must await another context: such discourses as these are analogous to the "comparative religion" born in early modern Europe and by now exported around the globe. As modern scholars go about the work of "comparing religions," they ought to ask whether people in the contexts they study engage(d) in any analogous practices—where, once again, "analogous" will mean not "their version of our X" but "a Y that, in this or that context, performs something like the same function as our X does (or did) in its own context." In a surprising number of cases, the answer will turn out to be in the affirmative. If myth is ideology in narrative form, and scholarship is myth with footnotes,⁹¹ then other people's myths will bear being placed on a par with the myths of the writers' own traditions. It may even be found that modern Euro-Americans are not the only ones to have developed writing practices analogous to footnotes.

Cantwell Smith was doubly wrong, then, when he concluded that there were no analogues to "religions" in premodern China and that the reason was an actual emphasis, in China and elsewhere, on interiority, on "faith" (essentially an attitude of mind-heart-soul) rather than mere "religion." On the one hand, the Chinese debates were largely about how to do things, not about the unseen contents of minds and hearts. On the other hand, there are analogues to Western discourse on "religion(s)," and they are occasioned, as Cantwell Smith himself might have predicted, by confrontations with difference.

Students of the history of Western discourse on "religions" have repeatedly noted that it, too, arose in a context of innovation, diversity, and fresh contact (often in colonial situations) with foreign ways. In the West, to speak of one "religion" is also to imply its distinction and difference from (and also partial similarity to) other species in the same genus. So much could also be said of the Chinese terminology of *dao* and *jiao*, even when these are used in the singular in phrases such as "the *dao* of X," at least weakly implying a distinction from *daos* of Y, Z, and so on. But Western discourse on "religions" is strongly contrastive in another sense as well: to name a "religion" in Western discourse is to imply a strong sense in which it is a "religion" as opposed to other, non-"religious" kinds of things. This type of contrast is largely absent in China. The reasons for this profound taxonomic difference are well worth investigating, but they would take us beyond the scope of this essay, involving as they do the shape of "religion" as a generic category, the history of the

⁹¹ See Lincoln (n. 42 above), p. 209.

ways in which it has been differentiated from other categories of phenomena, and the ramifications for that history of the institutional clashes between church and state in European societies.⁹²

In Western discourses, “religions” are, relatively speaking, “like-us,” whereas “unlike-us” are the “other” categories of “magic,” “superstition,”⁹³ “witchcraft” and “heresy,” always implied to be different kinds of things from “religions.” (“Popular religion” is always a borderline category—it is religious but is the kind of religion least like “ours.”) This sort of contrast, too, is largely absent in Chinese discourse, which speaks of “deviant *daos*,” “the *dao* of the left,” “licentious sacrifices,” and so on, without implying that such *daos* or such sacrifices are another kind of thing than *daos* or sacrifices proper.

Modern, nontheological Western discourse on “religions” is known for its apparent or attempted neutrality with regard to its objects of discourse, at least relative to the Chinese cases mentioned here, where every party to the discourse has a clear, and a clearly religious, ax to grind. But that is hardly to suggest that Western discourse on such matters is value-neutral, and the interestedness shows itself in an unexpected way—in the matter of the construction and maintenance of Western disciplinary and academic boundaries. In the West, in other words, defining “Daoism” may be crucial not only to some practicing Daoists (since Western recognition may play a crucial role in legitimating or altering the shape of communities and practices under study) but also when it comes to establishing who in the academy is qualified to speak about it, just as defining “religion” is crucial when it is matter of deciding who may speak about it and in what terms (one thinks of the old and still-ongoing debate about the *sui generis* nature of “religion”). One has only to scan any recent announcement of academic job openings to see the taxonomies (“Daoism,” “East Asian Buddhism,” etc.) at work. Our discourses on the “isms” structuring our collegiate curricula, job searches, publication lists, journals, and conference panels are not value-neutral, and they make a real difference in the distribution of academic prestige.

⁹² When the problem of what we could call “religion vs. the state” was debated in early medieval China—a context in which no such locution was ever developed, since the institutional context in which it would have made sense did not exist—the debate did take the form of arguing whether two spheres or realms are involved and whether they should remain distinct (*fangwai/fangnei*), but the crux of the issue always came down to a specific set of protocols or practices (should monks be compelled to bow to rulers during court ceremonies?), and the language does not suggest that practice of the *dao* is a fundamentally different category of activity than other areas or forms of life. The question was usually whether one may pursue such self-cultivational activities at court (thus justifying monks’ refusal to bow to rulers) or only in private settings.

⁹³ It is noteworthy that the modern Chinese expression usually used to translate this term, *mixin* [迷信], partakes of the path metaphor and essentially means “misguided trust,” implying that one’s faculty of trust, confidence, or belief has taken a wrong way.

FROM RELIGION-ENTITIES TO REPERTOIRES AND IMAGINED
COMMUNITIES: TWO SUMMARY PROPOSALS

Instead of thinking and speaking of religions as entities, how else might we think and speak of them? I close with two brief suggestions.

It is at least worth exploring whether such alleged things as “Daoism” and “Buddhism” are helpfully seen as “imagined communities,” in the felicitous phrase Benedict Anderson has applied to the similarly abstract entities known as “nations.” Anderson notes that all communities of larger than face-to-face-contact size are “imagined” in the following sense: “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁹⁴ Anderson immediately notes that the important question is that of how—to use his language, in what “styles”—this imagining takes place. He writes:

Javanese villagers have always known that they are connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were once imagined particularistically—as definitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship. Until quite recently, the Javanese language had no word meaning the abstraction “society.”⁹⁵ We may today think of the French aristocracy of the *ancien régime* as a class, but surely it was imagined this way only very late. To the question “Who is the Comte de X?” the normal answer would have been, not “a member of the aristocracy,” but “the lord of X,” “the uncle of the Baronne de Y,” or “a client of the Duc de Z.”⁹⁶

Taking our cue from Anderson, we would search our texts for indications of the imagined communities to which they refer. Such communities might or might not be as general as “the way of Buddha” (*fodao*); I suspect that they will often be more particular. They would also vary according to situation and interlocutor, just as ethnic identifications are known to vary according to whom a subject is speaking and what the topic and context of discussion are.⁹⁷

Furthermore, the word “refer” as used three sentences ago invites the misunderstanding that so general an imagined community as *fodao*

⁹⁴ Anderson, p. 6. For a recent critique of Anderson’s approach to ethnicity, albeit one that does not affect my argument here, see Frank Proschan, “Peoples of the Gourd: Imagined Ethnicities in Highland Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 60 (2001): 999–1001.

⁹⁵ But did it have any expressions that operated analogously, in contexts where we, or where contemporary Javanese, might invoke such a term?

⁹⁶ Anderson, pp. 6–7.

⁹⁷ See Michael Moerman, “Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue?” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 1215–30, and “Being Lue: Uses and Abuses of Ethnic Identification,” *American Ethnological Society, Annual Spring Meeting, Proceedings* (1967), pp. 153–69.

somehow just exists and retains unity and coherence independently of references to it. We should think of the coherence of such imagined communities as something repeatedly claimed, constructed, portrayed, or posited in texts, rituals, and other artifacts and activities, rather than as simply given. Much of this claiming concerns the past: the importance of retrospective selection, organization, and classification by latecomers as they tell the stories of communities they are in the process of imagining, highlighting certain aspects of the past and creatively forgetting others, cannot be overstated.⁹⁸ Processes of the (again often retrospective) construction of lineages and the selection and arranging of scriptural canons are places where the process of community-imagining can be observed especially clearly. As we observe such processes at work, we will notice common touchstones, things referred to again and again—certain words, figures, stories, or texts—but how these are portrayed, used, and interpreted may vary so dramatically that the mere notation of references to them gains us very little. This is why the antiholistic use of the plural, as in Jonathan Smith's and others' references to "Christianities," is a much more textually and historically accurate scholarly practice, especially if we are to avoid inadvertently inventing new imagined communities ourselves. Above all, one thing is surely clear: there is no core "essence" that could constitute whatever coherence such communities do display.

Our discussion of the contexts of nominalization and reification furthermore shows the importance of "others" against whom an "our X" (where X will metaphorically be portrayed as a tradition, group, way, etc.) can be demarcated. We will often observe strategies of community-imagining at play in texts stemming from contexts of close contact with perceived others. It may be that some imagined "others" are strictly necessary for the claiming of an "own" identity and coherence.⁹⁹ For, absent a perceived plurality of communities, ways, and so on, there is little occasion for nominalizing, reifying, or otherwise picturing an imagined community as a thing with certain properties.

Another way to think and speak of religions, rather than treating them as fully integrated systems and as containers into which persons, ideas, practices, and texts may be fit without remainder, is to imagine them as repertoires of resources. Ann Swidler has recently shown in considerable empirical detail that people relate to elements of their culture in this way, as tool kits or repertoires used variously by individuals in negotiating

⁹⁸ See recently the provocative comments in Willi Braun, "Amnesia in the Production of (Christian) History," *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 28 (1999): 3–8, comments on 5.

⁹⁹ Again, Moerman's work ("Ethnic Identification," "Being Lue") on the relativity of ethnic-identity claims to the conversational situation and the presence of certain types of interlocutors with certain interests is quite significant in this regard.

their lives.¹⁰⁰ Important questions for research include not only what is in a given repertoire but also how and in what circumstances any given piece in the repertoire is performed on some occasions and by some actors but not others.¹⁰¹ Swidler has found of cultural repertoires—and I see no reason why the same may not be said of religious repertoires—that they are organized around certain concrete “scenes or situations of action,”¹⁰² often narrative in nature, and that people avail themselves of multiple scenes as they negotiate their lives, even when these scenes carry contradictory implications regarding a particular area of life (such as, in Swidler’s case, love), because each scene is especially good for deciding or talking about one particular aspect of that area of life and no one scene suffices for all of it. Swidler finds of cultural repertoires that they are not accessible to everyone in the same degree and that people use different amounts of culture even when they have equal access to it; people use culture more in situations of flux or novelty, when their lives are uncertain—another statement that could easily be extended to how people use their religions.¹⁰³ A repertoire may contain different and indeed contradictory models of certain areas or aspects of life because these models answer different sets of questions; people resort to these models in their discourse about meanings and values even when they reject certain implications of each model as implausible, in part because each model describes something about the real constraints of life and institutions or, rather (more correctly), about the lines of action individuals pursue in the context of those constraints and institutions.¹⁰⁴

All of this runs contrary to the Geertzian emphasis on culture as all-encompassing ethos and on religions as “cultural systems”; Swidler shows us agents using culture’s repertoire in complex, varying ways on various occasions, shifting the cultural framing of a problem in mid-discourse.¹⁰⁵ It also runs counter to the tendency to think of religions as “conceptual systems” (Émile Durkheim), “systems of symbols” (Geertz), or “theoretical schemes” (Robin Horton) outside of which “members” of said religions cannot think.¹⁰⁶ And if we imagine religions as repertoires

¹⁰⁰ Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹⁰¹ These ideas are introduced in *ibid.*, pp. 24 ff.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰³ See esp., *ibid.*, pp. 52 ff. and 99 ff.

¹⁰⁴ See esp., *ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

¹⁰⁵ See esp., *ibid.*, p. 79. Compare the post-Geertzian formulations of Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 5–12. Hymes, too, adopts the metaphor of repertoire.

¹⁰⁶ A tendency helpfully analyzed and criticized by Terry Godlove in his essay, “In What Sense Are Religions Conceptual Frameworks?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1983): 289–305.

used by people in these ways, we may even begin to deconstruct the gap posited by the modern study of religion between itself and its objects—"the difference between those who sufficiently transcend culture and history [and religion(s)] to perceive the universal (and scientific) in contrast to those who remain trapped in cultural and historical [and religious] particularity and are therein so naturally amenable to being the object of study."¹⁰⁷ If we imagine religions and cultures as repertoires, then everyone—not merely those who study religions but also those who participate in them—is potentially in the position of bricoleur, syncretist, and comparativist.

In sum, my argument is not that we should cease speaking of religions in cultures that lack an analogous vocabulary because they lack that vocabulary; for, as I have shown, matters are not that simple, and even a culture as different from the modern West as that of early medieval China, with its situation of new religious imports and plurality, generated analogous usages. But, if we are to go on speaking of religions, we should at least find new metaphors for doing so. If possible, the new metaphors should avoid picturing religions as really existent things in the world; as organisms; as hard-sided, clearly demarcated containers of people and things; and as agents, because picturing them in all these ways falsifies the actual state of things and skews our research questions in unfortunate ways. Religions do not exist, at least not in the same way that people and their textual and visual artifacts and performances do. And when religions are metaphorically imagined as doing things, it becomes harder to see the agents who really and nonmetaphorically do things: people.

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¹⁰⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 259.