

BOOK REVIEW

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***The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Daoism.* James Robson (ed.). Series edited by Jack Miles. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015. Pp. xxxviii + 816. ISBN: 9780393918977**

Reviewed by: Jonathan Tuckett, The Unseen University

The reader should, perhaps, take this review with a pinch of salt; I have reservations about using the word “religion” in the context of China, especially before the introduction of Christianity and the processes of globalisation. Yet, Robson’s volume on *Daoism*, as a contribution to *The Norton Anthology of World Religions*, does little to allay these reservations. Indeed, the attempt to present “Daoism” as a “religion” and a “world religion”, no less, frankly smacks of intellectual colonialism.

In his introduction to *Daoism*, Robson observes that the “Western imagination of Daoism” has resulted in a divide which sees Daoism as a “pure philosophy” and “impure religion” (46-47). Such a division is artificial and, Robson goes on, is inaccurate and untenable. However, if the reader thinks that Robson therefore intends to dismantle this artificial division with his volume, then they will be sorely disappointed. As a subsequent section—“Daoism Reconsidered: The “Unofficial High Religion of China”—make obvious, Robson proper aim is to show that Daoism is not an “impure/low religion”, but a “pure/high” one. But such a monumental task is faced with the admission that recent scholarship has discovered the ‘heterogeneity of the tradition’ leading to a ‘state of maximum chaos’ within the field studying Daoism (pp.54). All this leads to an important question: What is Daoism?

Presumably, if one takes the comparative approach, there is some aspect(s) of Daoism that makes it comparable to the other religions included in the other anthologies in the Norton series. But at the end of his introduction to the volume, Robson observes that: ‘The problem of who counts as a Daoist confounds sociologists even today’ (66). This is followed by a long string of diverging details and facts to which the term “Daoism” might, and has, been

applied, leading to the conclusion: 'All these facets of Daoism have helped ensure the appeal and resilience of Daoism throughout Chinese history, and some of them have also contributed to Daoism's increasingly broad appeal outside of China' (67). Yet none of this gives much sense to what Daoism is—or, indeed, if we should be using the word "is" at all. For Robson, though, this question is glossed over for another. That Daoism is a religion is not in question (even though we don't know what it is), what is in question is whether we can count it as a *world* religion, for apparently people are now talking about it as one.

To understand what Robson's volume on *Daoism* is trying to achieve, we must turn back to the series editors' preface to the entire project. Indeed, they are faced with the problem that in defining how "world religion" has been understood by the series, when the discussion inevitably turns to Daoism it becomes rather clear that the reasons for its inclusion covers why they didn't follow their own rules (xxvi-xxviii). Yet this is hardly surprising for a project whose intention is to 'include neglected works of beauty and power whose very appearance here might help them become canonical' (xxv). It is not that Daoism is a world religion, but that the editors would very much like it to be one, and the *Daoism* volume will presumably be a step in creating it as one. And it is a very European understanding of religion indeed: religion deals with the supernatural.

What I suspect is that "Daoism" is a catchall term for "vernacular religion" in China—though I am dubious whether the word "religion" should be included in this. Better may be "folk religion" with its implied pejorative as, at a number of points, Robson seems to let slip that the "heartland" of Daoism is to be found in rural communities which were often far removed from the Imperial Court of China and less subject to its rulings. That "Daoism" is a catchall term for a diversity practices/groups is also made clear in the opening section "Dawn of Daoism" in which Robson points to the very diversity of meanings of the key term "*dao*" (77-82) without ever really suggesting that one stood out to make the "*dao*" of Daoism. Indeed, the very first "Daoist" text in the volume does not use "*dao*" self-referentially, but applies it to Confucian teachings (83). What the volume tangentially points to, is how, on occasion, some these "folk" traditions gained enough popularity that they were then incorporated into the "official", government sanctioned domain. Thus, the various Movements which are brought up throughout the volume—Celestial Masters, Upper Clarity, Numinous Treasure, Thunder Rites, Divine Empyrean, among others—were (contra)distinct groups which drew upon their own resources, the resource of other "daoists", the Confucians, and the Buddhists, that gained enough support and influence to be state endorsed. However, this is still not enough in my mind to speak of Daoism, and it makes more sense to speak of Daoisms. Indeed, Robson comes tantalisingly close to this when he refers to the Way of Pervading Unity, Li Sect, Fellowship of Goodness and School of the Way as 'religions' (643). Were this interpretation carried throughout the volume far better sense would have been made of the material.

However, this use of "religions", as opposed to "religion", appears to be a momentary slip in Robson's account. Rather, his main intention seems to be

to present a “religion” centred around the topics of alchemy and the achievement of immortality. This becomes obvious with the extract from *The Seal of Unity of the Three* (133-142). Up to this point, Robson continually observes, all the extracts are also to do with political and social harmony—the subsequent extract from *The Book of Master Han Fei* is highly illustrative of this point (142-151)—to such a degree that it seems that the word “religion” is being shoe-horned in. With *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, however, as the “primary scripture” of the traditions of “external alchemy” and “internal alchemy”, do we see a text which is not so “interwoven”. This text gets a significantly longer introduction than the others before it, and this need for exposition would seem (tacitly) to be because we are dealing with the first text which is “purely religious” as the Western reader would (should?) think of it. By the time the reader gets to the section on “The Resurgence and Diversification of Daoism” they will be hard pressed to find an extract which is not concerned with alchemy or immortality.

This presentation—and it is just that—of Daoism becomes somewhat ironic when Robson comes to mention “Taosim: A Prize Essay” in which the author portrays Daoism as having become ‘a degenerate religion focused on magic, miracles, charms, incantations, and beliefs about an elixir of immortality’ (642). This particular essay arose during a specific period in history when China was coming under the rule of the People’s Republic, caught up in a process of Western adoption and rejection. As Robson himself admits, “religions” were forced to fit the Christian mould (641-642). As such this was a period Daoists had to be present a religion in order to gain any form of legitimation in China. And his volume contributes to the culmination of this process—sparked by Western intellectual colonialism—by presenting Daoism as a religion. Indeed, enforcing the superiority of the West, he tacitly takes this process out of the Chinese’s hands by showing the futility of their attempts to suggest that Daoism is not a religion obsessed with alchemy and immortality through his choice of texts.

Throughout this volume, the reference to Daoism as “a religion” continually feels strained. Even in the modern period (post-WWII), Robson cannot avoid pointing to how non-sanctioned forms of Daoism are proliferating more than their sanctioned counterparts (pp.647-649). A position which ultimately begs the question of what Daoism is and judiciously avoids a clear answer because it would seem there isn’t one. If the reader wishes to gain some insight into what Daoism might be, they would be better off avoiding anything that would fit it—if it is an “it”—in a “World Religions Paradigm”.