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It is an intriguing observation that the commitment to religious ideals has led to comparable movements and institutions in different cultures and traditions. As the author points out in the Introduction, this book provides “an overview of Daoist monastic institutions, buildings, rules, and behavior in the Chinese middle ages, from the late sixth to the mid-eighth centuries” (xi), by contrasting the description of the Chinese situation with monastic patterns in Christianity, Buddhism, and to a lesser extent, in Hinduism. The cross-cultural perspective serves as a device to distinguish typical traits of monasticism, and to enhance the understanding of the specific features of the medieval Daoist tradition.

The book begins with an examination of modern monastic studies in the West, and a general characterization of monasticism (chapter one). Then, in chapter two, it focuses on “Origins and History” by concentrating on “protomonastic types” of monasticism in Christianity and Hinduism as they can be found in the figures of ascetics, hermits, and renouncers (“who combine the characteristics of ascetics and hermits and actively create a lifestyle distanced from, yet confronting, normative society” (xiii). Kohn compares the three types to

the magical practices (fangshi) and immortals of the Han and earlier dynasties as well as the Daoist recluses of the middle ages who combine the two earlier ideals and inherit the renunciation tradition of Buddhism. The first beginnings of the monastic endeavour are then found among the early Celestial Masters, who created millenarian communities that were in many ways forerunners of later monasteries. Chinese Buddhism, finally, added institutional organization, so that by the fifth century the first semi-monastic communities appear. (xiii)

Chapter three discusses three central motives (that is, karma and retribution, Great Peace, family values) of monastic Daoists, and examines (with an eye on Buddhism and Christianity) “the key metaphors” of their vision. Chapter four investigates the relation to society, the role of the...
state, the “monk’s rules for interaction with society, including ways to prevent defilement, purification exercises, and the maintenance of a proper distance to laypeople,” the motivation and social background of Daoist monks, and “women recluses who, in contrast to other traditions, were considered equal” (xiii). Chapter five considers the context and symbolic significance of buildings and compounds, as well as “issues of location and patronage in comparative perspective” (xiii). Chapter six deals with daily discipline, covering issues of personal hygiene, abstinence from intoxication and sexual contact, meal regulations and food taboos, the procedures of the ceremonial noon meal, and the various forms in which monastics interacted among themselves, notably masters with disciples (xiv).

The last two chapters examine implements and vestments, on the one hand, and the liturgy (“control of time...daily ceremonies, rites to activate the scriptures, annual festivals of purgation, formal ordinations, and the various rituals surrounding death, burial, and mourning”), on the other hand (xiv). The book ends with a conclusion and an appendix, which refers to the major texts that have been consulted in this study.

To distinguish monasticism from other forms of religious life, Kohn refers to Mark Juergensmeyer’s (1990, 546–553) four key characteristics; that is, “portable and personal spiritual practice,” “separation from ordinary life,” “the evolution of a same-sex kindred community,” and forming an “alternative to ordinary society” (4f.). With George Weckman (1987, 10:35-41), the author defines monasticism as:

a specific organization whose members are characterized by their separate social status and relationship, controlled by fixed sets of discipline and rules, and marked by special garb and utensils

and:

their specific buildings and cells, the permanent nature of their calling their strict obedience to the abbot or master, life in poverty and simplicity, and the practice of asceticism.

Monastics are people who:

Typically engage in religious activities, such as liturgy, ritual, prayer, and meditation, but a large portion of their time is taken up by self-cultivation practices, community interaction, and physical labor. Some also serve society through aiding the poor, caring for the sick, and educating children.” (5f.)

Of particular interest is “the motivation behind the monastic endeavor,” which she discusses under the heading of “The Monastic Urge” (6–10).

There may be many reasons for becoming a monk or nun. In some cases they can be rather worldly and circumstantial. In principle, however,
they depend on the perception of reality and the vision of personal and communal perfection, as this perfection is suggested and outlined by the understanding of reality. The attainment of liberation, of inner unity and peace, of wholeness and the salvation of the soul, of self-realization and the transformation of the self, of complete surrender to the divine and to God, points to goals which emerge variously from different religious traditions and world-views. The terms may vary from tradition to tradition, but they join each other in the vision of a state of perfection that asks for comparable attitudes and ways of pursuing this state. Following the rule of St. Benedict, it makes sense to distinguish

...ten features of monastic discipline that form the focus of the reclusive life and characterize much of monastic thinking and psychology. Formulated in different terms, they are also present in the monastic traditions of other orders and cultures.

These features can be condensed in terms of solitude, discretion, compunction, humility, asceticism, poverty, virginity, obedience, stability, work (9f.)

Kohn concludes her introductory remarks with a brief discussion of the “communal organization” (10–15), and on liminality (15–18). As Ilana Silber (1995, 47) has shown, in her “Weber-based examination of the distinctive features of monasteries,” religious virtuosity

...can lead to the establishment of monasticism—defined “as social formation with its own internal demands and dynamics, but standing in a close dialectical relation to the social and cultural environment in which it sustained itself over time.” (12)

Where the efforts of this virtuosity succeed, they end in “a total institution with complete control over all aspects of its members’ time, space, and activity” (12), and numerous features of dialectical relations. As to the ramifications of the communal organization, it is “essential to distinguish closely between monasticism as an ideal or personal experience and monasticism as a social, potentially total institution” (15).

As Victor Turner (1969, 95) has pointed out, liminality refers to a state in the ritual process in which a person comes to exist “between positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (15). Kohn interprets monasticism as “an acute manifestation of liminality” (15). She is convinced that “among all the different analyses of monasticism, understanding the phenomenon in the light of liminality offers the most comprehensive and yet simplest interpretation” (17).

Though Daoism had been in existence for many centuries, “in a variety of different schools in both organized and eremitic forms,” the history of
Daoist monasticism begins in the late fifth century CE, being inspired by the example of Chinese Buddhism. On the one hand, they “continued the communal organization and structure of the Celestial Masters” (19); that is, of a millennial movement of the second century which had become “the most widespread form of Daoism in the early middle ages” (19). Next to the two factors of Buddhism and the Celestial Masters, the traditions of ascetics and hermits, the fangshi and the immortals, “who practiced solitary seclusion long before either organized Daoism or Chinese Buddhism made their appearance”(19), are mentioned as additional reasons for the rise of medieval Daoist monasticism.

To elucidate the beginnings of Daoist monasticism Kohn examines the history of monastics in India and the West, and focuses on fangshi and the immortals, the Celestial Masters, and the development of Chinese Buddhism as well as on “Early Monasteries” in which Daoists started to live quasi-monastic institutions (20–42). Against this background, she describes then (in chapter three and four) the monastic institution of medieval Daoism as it “developed fully in the late sixth to eighth centuries” (43), with the Fengdao kejie (Rules and precepts for worshipping the Dao) and the Yinyin jing (Scripture of karmic retribution), as the two major manuals of the monastic movement. The description is particularly sensitive to the social and cultural context in which Daoist monasticism evolved in interaction with the political forces and interests. “Never rejecting the Confucian morality of traditional China, Daoist monastics thereby transformed it toward a higher dimension of ethics and placed themselves at the center of the realization of mainstream values” (45).

After the discussion of these more general traits in the first four chapters, the author outlines in the remaining chapters the specific features of monastic life in medieval Daoism. It is a detailed description of the way in which Daoist monks and nuns tried to reach Great Peace and Complete Perfection, but as a result of which Daoist monasteries became also centres of meaning and orientation in Chinese society. That the monastic institution became subject to various political and social tensions and conflicts, underlines its growing importance, as well as the fact that it shares in the dialectics of power and the struggle for cultural predominance.

As Kohn points out in the conclusion (197–201), the Chinese situation “matches the organizational patterns and lifestyles developed by monastics in other traditions, most prominently Buddhism and Christianity” (197). Whether we think of the hermit ideal, of the tension between individuals and communal efforts, or of the reconditioning of behaviour and physical

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activities, as they become motives of specific organizations, they do not only interact with their cultural environment, but are also shaped by it and the forces which they both generate.

The presentation of the monastic life of medieval Daosim is clear, informative, and well documented. At the same time, the cross-cultural perspective recommends itself by the manner in which it enhances the presentation and the understanding of this complex phenomenon. Moreover, since the formation of Daoist monasticism can be seen as a development in which implicit religious attitudes become an explicit form of religiosity, it offers itself as an example which permits us to study and to clarify the meaning of implicit religion.

References


