

## Introduction

This collection of essays has been gathered together in order to support and develop the claim made by Edward Machle that Xunzi 荀子, a third-century-b.c.e. Confucian philosopher, is a religious philosopher. Or to put it differently, if we wish to fully understand Xunzi's work, we must recognize that his various philosophical positions are embedded within a developed religious vision. Unfortunately, in most modern scholarship on Xunzi, it has been the exception and not the rule to recognize the importance of Xunzi's religious vision in the overall shape of his work. Instead, scholars have regularly accused Xunzi of being antagonistic toward religious practice.<sup>1</sup> This accusation often emphasizes Xunzi's critical evaluation of his contemporaries' religious interpretation of ritual practice. Xunzi strikes many scholars as an early Confucian exemplar of secular and proto-scientific philosophical inquiry. Like Freud or Marx, he is believed to be presenting a conception of ritual practice that explains away or reinterprets in a secular psychological framework what was previously conceived of in religious terms. Much of this overemphasis on Xunzi's critique of religious practice arises from mistaken conclusions drawn from an examination of Xunzi's ritual theory.

To understand how these interpretations of Xunzi might come about, consider the image on the cover of this book. The painting depicts a family offering a goat for sacrifice at the end of the lunar year. Mother, father, and kneeling son offer the sacrifice at an altar, while the remaining two sons light firecrackers. The image shows us a common scene of Chinese ritual activity. In addition, the colophon tells us that this image depicts Yin Zifang and his family. Yin Zifang's story is first recorded as a biography in the *Houhanshu* 後漢書 *History of the Later Han*. It reads as follows:

During the time of Emperor Xuan 宣帝 (73–49 b.c.e.) lived Yin Zifang 陰子方, who had achieved the utmost of filial piety and possessed benevolence and compassion. Once when Yin Zifang was seeing to the morning cooking on the day of sacrifice at the end of the lunar year, the kitchen god appeared to him. Zifang twice showed obeisance and received blessings. His household had a yellow goat, and he sacrificed it to the kitchen god. From this point onward, Yin Zifang rapidly rose to fame and fortune. His fields measured over ten thousand acres. His chariots, horses, servants, and slaves compared with those of the ruler of a state. Zifang often said, “My children and grandchildren are bound to be strong and mighty.” Three generations have followed and are still flourishing and prosperous. For this reason the descendants often offer a yellow goat to the kitchen god at the sacrifice for the end of the lunar year.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Yin Zifang combines three significant elements. First, it mentions the level of moral cultivation and achievement of Yin Zifang. He is declared to have reached the height of filial piety, an important Confucian virtue achieved only through a long process of moral cultivation. Second, in recognition of this achievement he is visited and blessed by the kitchen god. It is implied that this blessing and the riches and prosperity that follow from it are a reward for his achievement in moral cultivation. Third, Yin Zifang and his descendants, having been blessed, continue to perform the ritual sacrifice of a yellow goat. One could argue that Yin Zifang, through his own human efforts, cultivates a virtuous disposition, which is then recognized by a god, who rewards him for the accomplishment. Ever after, Yin Zifang and his descendants sacrifice a yellow goat to acknowledge the kitchen god and maintain their prosperity.

This interpretation of Yin Zifang’s story is paradigmatic of a type of early Chinese religious interpretation, and although this kind of interpretation of ritual practice was quite common in the third century b.c.e.—as well as in the later Han from when the story derives—it is precisely this type of interpretation that Xunzi wholeheartedly rejects. Within this understanding of ritual practice, the prosperity of Yin Zifang and his descendants is directly due to the blessing of the kitchen god, maintained through the sacrifice of the goat, and only indirectly due to his own efforts in moral cultivation.

Xunzi rejects the interpretation of ritual practice offered in the story of Yin Zifang. He repudiates the supernatural and literal interpretations of ritual symbols and actions and instead explains them in terms of their ability to shape and re-form human behavior, bringing individuals into harmony with themselves, their society, and the greater cosmos. He further refutes any interpretation of ritual performance that either involves the interaction between humans and supernatural beings, such as the kitchen god, or ties prosperity

and success only indirectly to human efforts at moral cultivation through ritual participation.

The fact that Xunzi repudiates this sort of account has led scholars to conclude that he is antagonistic toward religious practice. However, what we find in Xunzi is *not* a critique of religious practice as such but rather a critique of certain forms of religious practice and interpretations of religious practice—the forms that treat rituals and supernatural beings as mere instruments of personal advantage and interpretations that fail to appreciate the proper function of ritual in moral cultivation. What underlies Xunzi's critique, we believe, is not an unqualified rejection of religious practice but a careful and penetrating interpretation of religious practice. As we will see shortly, all of the contributors to this volume argue in one way or another that Xunzi's understanding and explanation, and in some cases reinterpretation, of ritual practice constitute a compelling and sophisticated ritual theory embedded in a broader religious vision. In what follows, we briefly recount Xunzi's views about ritual, describe the context in which he advances them, and explain how each of the essays explicates and develops his broader vision of ritual and religion.

To start, Xunzi considers himself a follower of the Confucian tradition and is committed to the project of moral cultivation laid out by Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius). He believes that the teachings of Kongzi reveal the proper and only way to successfully cultivate virtuous human dispositions. By acquiring these virtues through participation in the Confucian ritual order, a person can become a 君子 *junzi*<sup>3</sup> or, in rare instances, a sage 聖人 *shengren*. Individuals who have achieved the level of *junzi* or sage are in turn capable of teaching others to follow the Confucian Dao 道 and bringing harmony and order to Chinese society. Moreover, it is only through the efforts of the *junzi* and sages that the Dao is brought into existence and maintained from one generation to the next. Central to this project of moral cultivation and teaching is participation in the Confucian ritual order.<sup>4</sup> By the third century b.c.e., when Xunzi was writing, Confucianism, and especially participation in the Confucian ritual order, had come under attack from other schools of thought.<sup>5</sup> Many of these figures presented sophisticated and compelling critiques of the Confucian vision. Fully engaged in the intellectual culture of his time and well aware of these critics, Xunzi developed his understanding of ritual practice in order to justify the Confucian tradition in light of what he took to be both internal misinterpretations and external critiques.<sup>6</sup>

Of the critiques external to the Confucian tradition, Xunzi primarily recognizes two schools of thought as significant threats—Mohism and Daoism. Although the grounds for their critiques differed, both Mohists and Daoists disputed the claim that ritual practices were important and salutary components of the good life. Mozi 墨子 argued that Confucian ritual practice wasted limited human and natural resources. As he saw it, the Confucian ritual order did not

succeed in producing order and prosperity for the people but instead led to excessive expenditures and conflict. Mozi and his supporters rejected the ritual order because it did not provide the necessary institutions or guidance for strengthening and developing the state. Alongside Mozi, the Daoist critique, primarily found in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, rejected any form of ritual practice that rested on participants committing themselves to normative ethical standards such as right and wrong, or good and bad.<sup>7</sup> Commitments to such standards cloud the mind and prevent the individual from being able to perceive the patterns of the Dao in the world and respond to them in an open and spontaneous manner. As will be apparent from the essays in this volume, Xunzi responds to these challenges in various ways, often adopting and adapting much of the position of his adversary in order to strengthen his own argument.

Still other threats to proper interpretation and practice of ritual were internal to the Confucian tradition. Xunzi believed his Confucian predecessor Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) held a conception of human nature and understanding of moral psychology that was a dangerous deviation from the original vision of Kongzi.<sup>8</sup> Rather than emphasizing the external guidance of the rites and the teachings of the sages, Mengzi's conception of moral cultivation focused wrongly, according to Xunzi, on the internal cultivation of an innate moral sense. In other words, Mengzi failed to properly appreciate the importance of ritual practice and the manner in which participation shaped human dispositions to act in accordance with the Dao. It was this misinterpretation of Kongzi's teachings that Xunzi believed was central to Mengzi's philosophy and must be corrected. Xunzi's theory of ritual practice as central to moral cultivation is meant to rectify Mengzi's misrepresentation of Kongzi's teachings.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, recognizing himself as a follower of the Confucian tradition, a tradition under assault from various external and internal sources, Xunzi developed a conception of ritual practice and moral cultivation in order to defend the Confucian ritual order from its detractors by providing a sophisticated and comprehensive explanation of ritual participation that would prevent future generations from misinterpreting the original Confucian teachings. To this end, Xunzi's ritual theory remains embedded in the framework of the Confucian religious vision.

While this volume aims to support and defend Machle's claim that Xunzi be read as a religious philosopher, it should be noted that Machle was not the first Western scholar to take Xunzi seriously as having a significant religious vision. In 1945, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown delivered the Henry Myers lecture at the Royal Anthropological Institute, entitled "Religion and Society," in which he argues that Xunzi has a ritual theory and a conception of religious practice. Later published as a chapter in his book *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, the essay as a whole focuses on the broader question of the relationship between religion and society and the role played by ritual practice in this relationship.<sup>10</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown begins his essay by reiterating an earlier approach he developed to the study of religion. Rather than focus on the beliefs of a given religion, a form of scholarship that he finds prevalent in Western religious studies of the early twentieth century, he advocates that we instead examine the social function of religion within a given society. His approach to the study of religion can best be summed up in his own words:

[A]n orderly social life amongst human beings depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of a society of certain sentiments, which control the behavior of the individual in his relation to others. Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends. I ventured to suggest as a general formula that religion is everywhere an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power which we may speak of as a spiritual or moral power.<sup>11</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown further claims that this approach to religion and ritual is by no means new but can be found in the work of Xunzi. The rest of the essay then examines several religions in practice. In each case Radcliffe-Brown applies his approach to ritual in order to reveal the social function of religion, the way in which it provides the bonds that tie society together into a community.<sup>12</sup> These bonds, in their various forms in different cultures, express a sense of dependence that Radcliffe-Brown, and we believe Xunzi, takes to be central to the social function of religious practice. In considering this sense of dependence, we can distinguish two aspects. On the one hand, we can depend on others to help us in the face of the difficulties and vicissitudes of life in the natural and social world; yet, on the other hand, “we must submit to the control of our conduct by rules which are imposed.”<sup>13</sup> The Confucian ritual order provides the means by which to get things done in the world and enables the proper expression of human values and emotions. Yet, at the same time it restrains and shapes the forms of behavior that are permissible in human interaction. Although Radcliffe-Brown’s analysis of religion and ritual may be somewhat outdated, it is surprising to see that as early as the 1940s a prominent American scholar of religion had recognized Xunzi as a religious philosopher and ritual theorist. Radcliffe-Brown locates ritual practice as central to his conception of religion, a role that helps us understand how Xunzi conceived of the connections between ritual, religion, and social relationships. Furthermore, as will become apparent as you read the essays in this volume, later scholars of Xunzi owe much to Radcliffe-Brown and functionalist approaches to religion.

Each of the essays in this volume aims to reveal some aspect of Xunzi's religious vision and the ritual theory that underlies that vision. The essays have been organized into three groups—those that focus on Xunzi's overall religious vision, those that more specifically discuss his ritual theory, and those that examine Xunzi in a comparative religious perspective. Let us turn now to the first of these groups, Xunzi's religious vision.

Essays in this section of the volume address Xunzi's religious vision, his general understanding of religious practice and its relation to society and to the greater cosmos within which society exists. Together, these two essays reveal key elements of Xunzi's religious vision, such as the social function of religious practice, the proper religious interpretation of ritual practice, and the source and justification of religious reverence for the ritual order.

The first of these two essays, Edward Machle's "Xunzi as a Religious Philosopher," offers a compelling explication of Xunzi's philosophical orientation toward religious belief and practice. Xunzi, he argues, is not a mere critic of religion, nor is he wholly an apologist but rather what Machle calls a religious philosopher. The distinctive aim of the religious philosopher is "to make sense of the received religious tradition as a way of continuing to be part of it."<sup>14</sup> He may be thought of as engaging in what Thomas Kasulis has more recently described as *metapraxis*, the explanation and justification of ritual practice from within a given religious tradition.<sup>15</sup> In order to show why we should treat Xunzi as a religious philosopher, Machle begins by considering the more prevalent argument that Xunzi is antagonistic to religion and religious practice. His examination of these claims leads Machle to focus on two central components of the prevailing argument that he believes result from a misunderstanding of Xunzi's work.

The first of these components is Xunzi's rejection of the type of religious interpretation revealed in the story of Yin Zifang discussed earlier. Xunzi explicitly rejects certain ritual practices as well as specific interpretations of ritual practice. Machle argues that Xunzi's rejection of certain ritual practices and interpretations of ritual practice should not be construed as a rejection of religious practice as a whole, nor is it a rejection of all religious interpretations of ritual practice. Xunzi does indeed reject practices and interpretations founded on the physical efficacy of the rite, such as physiognomy and sacrifices for healing sickness. However, he still accepts and advocates participation in religious rites, such as the rain sacrifice and funerals, when accompanied by the proper interpretation, an interpretation that focuses on the psychological and social function of the rite in creating and maintaining harmony and community. According to Machle, funerals, then, become an important rite for explaining Xunzi's conception of religious practice. Funerals are a kind of performance and practice that addresses itself to both humans and spirits 神 *shen*. Yet they are not ultimately concerned with putting corporeal beings in communication with

noncorporeal ones. Ritual participants should sacrifice to the spirits “as if” they were present. As Machle describes it, for Xunzi, ritual practice becomes a matter of humane culture (his translation for 文 *wen*) and not magical manipulation. Ritual situates the individual harmoniously in society and the natural world.

Discussion of the relationship of humans and spirits in the funeral rites leads to a discussion of the second component on which Machle focuses, namely, Xunzi’s naturalistic, nonanthropomorphic conception of Heaven 天 *tian*.<sup>16</sup> Xunzi’s conception of Heaven deserves attention because he appears to reject the earlier Confucian portrayal of Heaven as having anthropomorphic characteristics such as will and consciousness. Both Kongzi and Mengzi speak of Heaven as having a will and being aware of and concerned about the activities of human beings. Xunzi does not share this view of Heaven. Yet, according to Machle, the human relationship with Heaven is still religious. “Xunzi includes all proper responses to Heaven’s action under his rubric of *li*. . . . A ritual response to natural initiative is surely in some proper sense religious.”<sup>17</sup> Xunzi demythologizes the conception of Heaven, while still maintaining a religious interpretation of the human relationship to Heaven. Through examining the misunderstanding of Xunzi’s rejection of forms of ritual practice and his conception of Heaven, Machle defends his claim that Xunzi is indeed a religious philosopher and in doing so highlights Xunzi’s interpretation of ritual practice and the relationship between human beings and Heaven.

Philip J. Ivanhoe, in the second essay in this section, describes the complexity and nuance of Xunzi’s understanding of the relationship between humans and the greater cosmos as embodied in the Confucian ritual order, or Dao 道. Ivanhoe separates Xunzi’s position from that of other theorists and explains why religious reverence constitutes a central element of Xunzi’s relationship to the Dao. According to Xunzi, the Dao, embodied in the ritual order, accomplishes at least two tasks. First, it leads humans out of the state of nature that Xunzi describes in the beginning of chapter 19 of his work, and second, it provides us with avenues for the satisfaction of basic human desires, as well as “opening up new and profound sources of satisfaction, sources which are available only to those who are inside and committed to the project of the Confucian Way.”<sup>18</sup> The Dao takes into account the character of human nature as well as the capacities and limitations of the nonhuman realm. It weaves the human and natural worlds into a seamless and harmonious whole that allows all things to flourish. According to Ivanhoe, the capacity of the Dao to bring about this harmonious cosmos deservedly elicits religious reverence, a reverence that can be found throughout Xunzi’s writing. “The Way inspired profound respect, awe, and nothing less than reverence in those who understood it. They alone realized that through the Way the sages joined human intelligence with the vast, complex, and staggering power of Nature to produce a harmonious and magnificent result.”<sup>19</sup> Through this essay, Ivanhoe expresses the scope and depth

of Xunzi's understanding of the Dao and explains why it would be worthy of the religious reverence that Xunzi affords it. In the process of this explanation, Ivanhoe also distinguishes Xunzi's religious vision from nonreligious visions, such as that of Hobbes, as well as alternative Chinese visions, such as those of Mengzi and Zhuangzi.

In the three essays of the second section of this volume, the focus shifts to Xunzi's ritual theory. In recent years ritual studies has become a field unto itself. It is recognized that ritual practice is an important element of religious experience and an equally important subject for the study of religion. Xunzi, like many present-day scholars, was interested in the forms, function, and role of ritual in the complete human life. For him, Confucian ritual was an integral part of the good life. To explain and justify the role of ritual participation in the good human life, Xunzi developed a rich and sophisticated ritual theory. The three authors of these essays approach Xunzi's theory from slightly different standpoints, bringing various theoretical interlocutors into the conversation. They begin from a position shared with Xunzi, namely, that human beings are born unfinished and must undergo a process of cultivation before they become fully human and humane. One of the difficult tasks in understanding Xunzi's work involves explaining the complex process of moral cultivation, the means by which ritual participation shapes each individual life from an originally inchoate and petty existence into the humane and harmonious existence of the *junzi* or sage. In each case, these authors bring to light the process by which Xunzi believes ritual shapes human life and in doing so bring Xunzi into the present conversation in ritual studies.

Perhaps more explicitly than either of the other two authors in this section, Robert Neville finds in Xunzi's ritual theory a valuable resource for contemporary discussion of ritual. Neville addresses three main points: the connection between Xunzi's ritual theory and Charles Peirce's semiotics, ritual's role in the proper formation of desire, and the function of ritual within religion as integrating desire at different levels of individual and social organization. Throughout the essay Neville works from a definition of ritual, influenced by his interest in semiotics, that is as broad as Xunzi's own. Ritual includes "all conventions, all learned signs and sign-shaped behaviors."<sup>20</sup> Ritual constitutes the very fabric of human interaction. Neville goes so far as to say that "civilization itself depends on ritual mastery in the sense that humaneness cannot arise unless there are ritual social habits that allow of its expression."<sup>21</sup> Statements such as this one also make clear Neville's debt to Peirce and semiotics, a connection that he draws in the first substantial section of the essay. In some sense, ritual becomes another way of discussing the semiotics of human interaction. Human beings engage in a symbol-laden ritual dance with one another. Through the signs and symbols of this dance we engage with the realities of human existence. Especially in the case of religious symbols, we would have no way to engage certain realities



without these symbols. By bringing Peirce's semiotics to bear on Xunzi's theory, Neville offers a set of tools for understanding the significance of ritual activity.

Neville develops this significance further by considering how ritual shapes even our inner life, our desires. Human beings are biological creatures, born with innate reactions to our environment. Desires are a powerful component of these innate reactions. As such they also pose a special problem for Xunzi and early Chinese philosophers in general. According to Xunzi, our desires do not originally lead to harmonious interaction with others or the natural environment. Our desires are often too powerful or weak and lack a full and proper specification of their objects and means of satisfaction. This problem is resolved by ritual participation and ritual mastery. Through culturally learned signs, behavior can become organized and given significance in ways impossible to achieve without ritual. The shaping and organization of impulses through ritual mastery takes place on several levels. As Neville explains, the most basic of these levels is the integration and organization of the individual personality. We become moral agents. As human beings we must next integrate ourselves into our family and eventually our larger community. "Each level achieves a ritual integration and intensity by weaving a pattern on the lower level. But that is a kind of force, a constriction. The lower levels pay a price by being integrated into the dance of the higher levels."<sup>22</sup> We willingly undergo this process of higher and higher levels of integration, despite the price paid by lower levels, because the higher levels of integration allow us access to more developed forms of satisfaction. Without this type of integration of desires, we remain petty men, as Xunzi would say, or no better than reptiles, according to Neville. Furthermore, Neville argues that Xunzi fails to properly account for and address the possibility and significance of disruptions to the higher levels of ritual integration caused by the accumulated pressure in the lower levels. Neville argues that these disruptions inevitably occur and that "religious rituals connect otherwise incommensurate strategies of integration. They release pressures. They reestablish broken dances."<sup>23</sup> Using the insights of semiotics, Neville develops a powerful set of conceptual tools for understanding Xunzi's theory on the one hand and reveals a potential difficulty within the theory itself on the other.

Lee Yearley recognizes three levels of spirituality in Xunzi's writings. The first level involves the explication and defense of social ritual as a means for spiritual fulfillment, the level much discussed by Neville. The next level includes Xunzi's critiques and reinterpretation of religious ideas and actions that lead to what Yearley refers to as spiritual deformation. Finally, there is the level at which humans come into contact with numinous powers arising, to some extent, from within themselves. Although Yearley discusses all three of these levels, it is the third level that informs much of the substance of his essay and constitutes Xunzi's significant contribution to the study of ritual. Before turning to the level of the numinous, let us look briefly at the lower two levels.

As most of the authors in this volume point out, Xunzi does not distinguish between social ritual and religious ritual. Social and religious ritual instead constitute elements on a continuum, from the proper way of addressing one's elder to the lavish pageantry of a ruler's plowing of the first furrow to begin the planting season. For Xunzi, all rituals along this continuum potentially contribute to full spiritual fulfillment, the life of the *junzi* or sage. Similar to Neville's connection of ritual to semiotics, Yearley argues that "social ritual provides the forms by which culture makes possible a specifically human life."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, from this understanding of the first level of spirituality, Xunzi derives criteria to critique the religious practice of his contemporaries. At the second level of spirituality, Xunzi attacks two types of religiosity, what Yearley labels technological and masochistic religiosity. Xunzi reinterprets or rejects various ritual practices in order to avoid these two types of religion—on the one hand avoiding the magical manipulation indicative of technological religion and on the other hand avoiding the complete submission to an external figure paradigmatic of masochistic religion. At this point in the essay, Yearley turns to discussion of the numinous, the highest level of spirituality.

According to Yearley, what Xunzi recognizes better than many ritual theorists is the depth and significance of human frailty in the face of both origins and terminations that they cannot control. The last sections of Yearley's essay are examinations of Xunzi's understanding of our human and ritual response to origins and endings. Xunzi argues that humans incur unrepayable debts to three primary origins: our ancestors, our rulers and teachers, and Heaven. Recognition of these debts requires some form of response. In each case, the need for a response creates the possibility of spiritual deformation as well as development. Ritual shapes the expression of gratitude such that it once again avoids the pernicious forms of spiritual deformation. By acknowledging our debt as unrepayable and expressing gratitude through ritual forms, ideally we contact the realm of the numinous, especially in relation to Heaven. Yearley argues that proper relation to the numinous for Xunzi involves a trained ignorance toward Heaven and its workings. Through ritual participation, we cultivate and express an attitude of reverence toward the numinous we recognize in these origins.

In order to explicate Xunzi's understanding of terminations, Yearley makes use of the notion of the primordial. The primordial, for Yearley, fits into a particular model of personal religious development, a model in which mature religiosity involves achieving a level of psychological integration at which the primordial no longer controls our responses to the environment. The danger with this type of religious development, a danger recognized by Yearley and Xunzi, lies in losing contact with the primordial within us.

This danger is significant because our spiritual health demands that we continue to be animated by what the primordial presents that is of

irreducible value. Indeed, we must be able to bring it into our ordinary life, sometimes by integrating it into that life, sometimes by seeing how it challenges the presuppositions of that life. In this view, then, we ought not simply grow beyond the primordial. We must also be able to return to it, to employ and be employed by it, because only in and through it can we be open to the numinous.<sup>25</sup>

Yearley explores this idea of the primordial and contact with the primordial in our everyday lives through Xunzi's explanation of death rituals. Death, both the deaths of loved ones and the contemplation of our own death that these events bring about, reanimates strong primordial reactions in human beings, reactions that must be controlled and shaped through ritual participation or else they would likely lead to both psychological and spiritual deformation. Yet, Xunzi recognized that ritual must shape and express these reactions without denying their power or "the significant religious reactions they potentially contain."<sup>26</sup> Part of this task is accomplished, according to Yearley, through the lived acknowledgment of the "necessary fiction" involved in ritual practice, performing the funeral rites "as if" the spirits were present. Although we must accept our frailty before the origins and terminations that frame all human life, ritual enables us to face the numinous and constructively shape the primordial without succumbing to destructive forms of religiosity.

As with Yearley, Mark Berkson discusses Xunzi's reinterpretation of religious practice. In fact, Berkson sees Xunzi's program of reinterpretation as a hermeneutic response to the contemporary challenges facing the Confucian ritual order. According to Berkson, we can best understand Xunzi's hermeneutic achievement if we consider three main elements: meta-level awareness and reflexivity, participant-observer consciousness, and symbolic realism. The essay proceeds to explicate and examine these three elements and does so through conversation with Western scholars of ritual such as Sigmund Freud, Roy Rappaport, and Robert Bellah. When brought together, Berkson argues, these elements reveal the sophistication and depth of Xunzi's ritual theory, a theory that should receive more attention in contemporary ritual studies.

Berkson conceives of meta-level awareness as the ability, fostered in Xunzi's conception of ritual participation, of the participant to reflect on ritual itself through their participation. "When ritual points in the direction of the sacred, it is always pointing, in part, to itself."<sup>27</sup> According to Xunzi, when serving the ancestors through death rituals, we also become aware of the ways in which participation in the rite shapes and expresses our own reactions to death as well as reconstitutes the bonds of community among the living and between the living and the dead. Death rites, Berkson argues, must accomplish a dual task. They must facilitate the passage of the deceased from the realm of the living to the realm of the ancestors—in the minds of the living—and in the

process also enable the living to move from being nonmourners to mourners and back again. According to Berkson, Xunzi's ritual theory takes account of these multiple aspects of ritual participation to some degree because of its emphasis on the cultivation of a meta-level awareness.

This meta-level awareness is closely connected to the second element of Xunzi's hermeneutic achievement, participant-observer consciousness. Berkson prefaces his discussion of participant-observer consciousness with a brief discussion of Freud's challenges to religious practice. Ritual participants, according to Berkson, are stuck with a two-horned dilemma. Either they unreflectively participate in ritual and become obsessed with wish fulfillment as Freud argues, or they become detached observers, cognizant of the delusional nature of ritual participation and alienated from ritual practice. Berkson rightly recognizes that Xunzi was aware of this dilemma himself. Xunzi, like Freud, worries about the possibility of obsession, of being blinded by a small portion of the truth. But rather than advocating detached observation, Xunzi instead argues that we should develop what Berkson calls participant-observer consciousness. "[T]he employer of participant-observer consciousness is aware of the paradox but also of the necessity of it. Ritual participation can be seen, perhaps, as a form of sophisticated pretending or play, artificial and invented, yet necessary for conflicted and fragile beings such as ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Although difficult to achieve, this state of awareness while participating is partially enabled by development of a meta-level awareness of ritual practice, ritual participants recognizing the self-reflective nature of their practice. Berkson goes on to argue that the character of ritual for Xunzi allows us to hold together opposites such as being simultaneously both participant and observer. The "as if" quality of ritual participation combined with its affective and somatic properties make it ideal for allowing these opposites to be woven together.

Given the difficulty of cultivating the first two elements of ritual participation, one of the consequences of Xunzi's conception of ritual participation is that there will be a hierarchy of ritual participants. Those who have fully cultivated a meta-level awareness that enables them to develop a participant-observer consciousness will participate in ritual at the highest level. Berkson describes those participating at this level as symbolic realists, a concept that he borrows from Robert Bellah. "Xunzi tells us that the truth lies not behind the symbols, but *in* them; in fact, it cannot be expressed in any other way. The symbols do not hide or distort reality; they are often the only way to fully express, apprehend, or experience reality."<sup>29</sup> While recognizing that the symbols and signs of the ritual order are human constructs, Xunzi's ideal ritual participant also understands that these symbols constitute the human cultural order, more specifically the Dao. As Berkson summarizes, only when we come to understand how these three elements interrelate in ritual practice do we see the depth and beauty of Xunzi's ritual theory. By itself, any one element is insufficient to convey the compelling nature of ritual practice.

One characteristic of Berkson's analysis can help us to understand the nature of the last two essays. Berkson makes excellent use of Western ritual theory both to challenge and explicate Xunzi's conception of ritual participation. The final two essays in this volume go one step further. They employ an explicit comparative religious framework.<sup>30</sup> That is not to say that the other essays do not engage in comparative analysis. Indeed, all of them engage in some level of comparative study. It proves difficult to discuss ritual theory without some amount of comparative material. What sets these essays apart is the aim of their authors to elucidate new aspects of other theories through comparison with that of Xunzi. Good comparative works of this kind usually share several characteristics. The focus of the comparison tends to be quite narrow. Although the theories or texts being compared may be broad and complex, comparative analysis is most successful when it can be tightly focused on a given issue or limited set of issues within the broader theories. Given this narrow focus, comparison begins by finding apparent affinities or differences between the theories. However, it then proceeds to find differences within the similarities and similarities within the differences, revealing the ways in which apparent similarity and difference at one level of analysis may dissolve into their opposite at another. Finally, comparative analysis succeeds when it enables us to see new aspects of the objects of comparison revealed through the comparative process itself. In both essays in this final section, the authors argue that comparison provides us with a new way of seeing and appreciating the ritual theories in question.

James Robson's essay narrowly focuses on the connection among ritual, tradition, and the role of the teacher in both Xunzi and Dōgen's understanding of ritual practice. As Robson points out, rarely do scholars compare Japanese and Chinese theories of ritual, and even more rarely are Confucian and Buddhist theories compared. Nevertheless, the comparison of Xunzi's third-century-b.c.e. Confucian conception of ritual practice with that of twelfth-century Buddhist Dōgen uncovers interesting affinities between the theories, affinities that Robson argues help shed light on Dōgen's later work. Beginning with an examination of the nature of ritual, Robson reconsiders previous comparisons made between the conceptions of ritual found in Xunzi and Durkheim. He concludes that their conceptions of ritual differ in at least two important respects. First, for Xunzi, collective effervescence is *not* central to ritual practice. Ritual differentiates and creates hierarchy rather than joining all participants into an undifferentiated unity. Second, Xunzi does *not* recognize a split between the sacred and profane spheres of human activity. Ritual is not set off from everyday life but a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. These differences between Xunzi and Durkheim lead Robson to suggest that there are greater affinities between Dōgen and Xunzi than between Durkheim and Xunzi. Like Xunzi, Dōgen conceives of ritual as differentiating and hierarchical as well as a part of everyday practice. For Dōgen,

“ritual conduct is the realization of the Way, and this should be realized at all times and in all places, whether one is alone or in the presence of others.”<sup>31</sup>

Having argued for the affinities between Xunzi’s and Dōgen’s conceptions of ritual, Robson next considers the role of the teacher and tradition in both theories. For both Xunzi and Dōgen, the role of the teacher and a specific ritual tradition are central to the achievement of moral cultivation or realization through ritual practice. The teacher plays the role of guide and interpreter of the tradition. Rituals require interpretation to be understood and performed properly. It is in the role of the teacher that we see a difference in the similarity between the two theorists. For Xunzi, a teacher can be anyone who has cultivated himself through participation in the Confucian ritual order to the extent that he becomes a *junzi*. Dōgen is more exclusive about who counts as a legitimate teacher. Only the master who has received face-to-face transmission of the Dharma in direct line from the Buddha should be considered a true teacher. As Robson argues, it is here that the importance of tradition can be seen as well. For Xunzi, it is the tradition of the Zhou rites transmitted through Kongzi that legitimates the Confucian ritual order. For Dōgen it is the tradition of face-to-face transmission originating with the Buddha. In both cases, the teacher acts as a living embodiment and interpreter of the tradition. Ritual further connects to tradition for Dōgen in that “Dōgen situates his treatment of meditation in the context of his ideas about the ways that particular ritual actions link the practitioner to the lineage of patriarchs and past Buddhas.”<sup>32</sup> Robson’s comparison of Xunzi and Dōgen ultimately provides, he believes, a means to better understand Dōgen’s focus on ritual and its role in the monastic community of Eihei-ji. It helps us to see more clearly aspects of both Xunzi and Dōgen’s ritual theories.

The last essay in this volume is T. C. Kline’s comparative examination of Xunzi’s conception of ritual and religion with aspects of Peter Berger’s sociological theory of religion found in his book *The Sacred Canopy*. Both theories include sophisticated explanations of the relationship between any given individual and the social environment in which she lives, an environment consisting primarily of ritual as it was broadly understood by Xunzi. Berger and Xunzi agree that human beings are born unfinished. They must be socialized and learn how to become competent participants in their social environment. In addition, they agree that the social environment is entirely a human construction, comprised of the type of signs and sign-shaped behaviors discussed by Neville. Despite their agreement on these fundamental points, when examined more closely it becomes apparent that they hold very different beliefs about the proper relationship between human beings and their socially constructed environment. On Kline’s view, this difference can be understood in terms of Jonathan Z. Smith’s distinction between locative and dynamic religious systems, where the

former stresses the importance of “fully inhabiting” one’s social roles and the latter requires religious practitioners to go beyond those roles.<sup>33</sup>

In order to clarify these differences, Kline explains Berger’s and Xunzi’s conceptions of the ideal human life, which are sagehood for Xunzi and authenticity for Berger. An advocate of a dynamic religious system, Berger argues for the individual’s need to break out of the social constructions of the worldview and stand naked before the chaotic cosmos. It is through moments of authenticity of this sort that the ideal religious practitioner recognizes the constructed nature of the social environment and simultaneously understands the necessity of such a sacred canopy to shelter human beings from the chaotic cosmos. Without these moments of authentic awareness, the individual remains trapped within the social constructions and exemplifies a form of bad faith. Xunzi, on the other hand, conceives of the ideal human life, that of the sage, as being one in which the individual becomes shaped in accordance with the ritual order to the extent that he is completely at home in it. The sage achieves a type of effortless harmony within the social order. There are no moments of rupture, or authenticity, as Berger understands them. According to Berger, the sage is living in bad faith, failing to occasionally break out of the social order and stand alone before the cosmos. Likewise, for Xunzi, Berger’s authentic individual has failed to fully cultivate himself such that he can achieve the effortless harmony of the sage. He remains at odds with the social order that will provide him with the greatest level of human fulfillment.

Kline argues that these differences in the two theorists’ conceptions of the ideal human life partially grow out of different conceptions of the nature of the cosmos. For Berger, the cosmos is fundamentally chaotic and human beings merely project order, in the form of a worldview, onto this underlying chaos. For Xunzi the cosmos contains order, though of a lower level than that achieved through the activity of the sages. As significant as these differences are, the most fruitful result of the comparison comes from examining the role that Xunzi’s characterization of human nature as bad plays in his theory. Berger’s theory posits that human nature itself is a constructed element of the worldview. Because of this claim, Berger has difficulty explaining the supposed fragility of the constructed worldview or how one could distinguish between authenticity and bad faith. Although Xunzi shares Berger’s belief in the fragility of the socially constructed ritual order, he does not encounter similar difficulties when trying to explain this fragility. Xunzi’s conception of human nature provides the basis for the explanation. Our innate dispositions, while capable of being shaped by the ritual order, do not originally direct us toward such ritual activity. Instead, human nature directs us away from just the type of socialization that would eventually enable us to achieve the highest level of human fulfillment, namely, the harmonious ease of the sage. As Kline argues, this shows that

Berger's theory would profit from a more explicit explanation of the inchoate conception of human nature that seems to be present in many of the theory's claims. Simultaneously the essay also makes a case for the inclusion of Xunzi's theory in contemporary discussion of religion and ritual.

Now that each essay has been briefly described, the overall scope and depth of this volume should be apparent. While we will not attempt to tie the insights of all eight essays together in such a short introduction, two points of commonality deserve mention. First, all of the authors affirm Xunzi's claim that ritual, broadly conceived, is central to human interaction. We cannot understand human interaction, and thus human society or even what is significant in individual human lives, without careful attention to the function and dynamics of ritual participation. Ritual gives meaning and depth to human existence. It enables us to become fully human creatures capable of expressing and participating in rich and powerful emotions in ways that create and maintain social bonds. We come to perceive the world and those around us in humane ways through proper ritual participation. Second, given the importance of ritual to the understanding of human flourishing and religious practice, more attention should be paid to Xunzi's understanding of religion and ritual. Although Xunzi develops his theory in order to defend the Confucian ritual tradition of the late Warring States period in China, his insights into ritual practice can be of use to us, twenty-first-century scholars outside of the Confucian tradition, in explaining and understanding our own lives and ritual practices. After a long period of neglect, there are signs that Xunzi's importance to ritual studies is gaining recognition. For example, one of the two epigraphs to Ronald Grimes's volume, *Readings in Ritual Studies*, consists of a long passage from the *Xunzi*. Yet we are far from seeing Xunzi as one of the world's great theorists in religious studies, as the authors of these essays would argue. This anthology begins to make a case for such a strong claim. Hopefully, it will be but a first step in this direction. Drawing Xunzi more fully into the contemporary conversation in religious studies will not only bring much deserved recognition to a great thinker but also enrich our discussion of ritual and religion.

### Notes

1. See the beginning of the essay in this volume by Edward Machle, "Xunzi as a Religious Philosopher."

2. *Houhanshu* 後漢書 (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1927, reprint of 1739 ed.), *juan* 62.5b–6a.

3. The term 君子 *junzi* has been translated in a variety of ways, among them "superior person" and "gentleman." None of these translations seem to capture fully the meaning of the term, and often the translations inadvertently carry unwanted associations in English. For this reason we have left *junzi* untranslated.



4. For a clear and concise introduction to the Confucian tradition and conceptions of moral cultivation, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, second ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000).

5. The period of philosophical growth in early China, roughly the fifth to third centuries b.c.e., is remarkable. Numerous philosophical schools arose and joined the collective debate concerning how best to organize the state, live a good life, reunify China, and bring peace and prosperity to the people. There are several excellent books on this period of Chinese thought. See, for example, A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989); Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

6. For a clear and concise discussion of this point, see the opening section of Mark Berkson's essay in this volume.

7. Paul Kjellberg and David Nivison have both written about the relationship between Zhuangzi and Xunzi in illuminating ways. See Kjellberg, "Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi on Skepticism," in Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the "Zhuangzi"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and Nivison, "Xunzi and Zhuangzi," in T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the "Xunzi"* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000).

8. The competing conceptions of human nature offered by Mengzi and Xunzi have already been discussed in depth. See D. C. Lau, "Theories of Human Nature in *Mencius* and *Xunzi*"; Bryan W. Van Norden, "Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency"; and David Wong, "Xunzi on Moral Motivation," all in T. C. Kline III and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the "Xunzi"* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000).

9. Xunzi's expressions of concern about Mengzi's misinterpretation of Kongzi's teachings marks an important moment in the development of a religious tradition. Both Mengzi and Xunzi recognize themselves to be part of the Confucian tradition. They agree on most of their positions. Their disagreement arises out of a debate about the proper understanding of the tradition as it is found in the original teachings of the founder, Kongzi. Xunzi accuses Mengzi of being a heretic, of developing what could be labeled a heretical interpretation leading followers away from the true Confucian Dao. This type of internal disagreement, in some important ways, signals the maturity of the Confucian tradition. Beginning with Xunzi, followers of the Confucian tradition continuously engage in debate about the proper interpretation of the tradition itself. For a discussion of some of the debate that occurs as the tradition develops through time, see John H. Berthrong, *Transformations of the Confucian Way* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

10. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), pp. 153–177. We had hoped to include this essay in the first section of this volume, but exorbitant permission fees have prevented us from including it here. Nevertheless, we briefly discuss the essay here in the introduction and encourage those who are interested to seek out the essay for further reading.

11. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," p. 157.

12. It is interesting to note that Radcliffe-Brown does not use Xunzi or even Chinese religious practice as a case study but as a conceptual resource for developing a new approach to understanding religion and its relation to society. In 1945, during the height of functionalist approaches to religion, Radcliffe-Brown chose to use Xunzi as a source for explicating and legitimizing his own approach to the study of religion.

13. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," p. 176.

14. Machle, chapter 1 of this volume, p. 21.

15. Thomas P. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, eds., *Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 169–195.

16. Machle has written extensively about Xunzi's conception of Heaven in his book-length translation and study of chapter 17: *Nature and Heaven in the "Xunzi": A Study of the Tian Lun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

17. Machle, chapter 1 of this volume, p. 40.

18. Ivanhoe, chapter 2 of this volume, p. 47.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

20. Neville, chapter 3 of this volume, p. 65.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

24. Yearley, chapter 4 of this volume, p. 85.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

27. Berkson, chapter 5 of this volume, p. 109.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 123–4.

30. We do not defend here the practice of comparative religious studies or even the more specific practice of comparative analysis of ritual theory. The essays themselves are left to speak in their own defense. Those who are interested in sophisticated and compelling defenses of comparative religion should read the essays collected in Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000). For examples of successful comparative religious studies, see Lee Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Karen L. Carr and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Anti-Rationalism: Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard's Religious Thought*, revised second edition (Createspace.com, 2010); and Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).

31. Robson, chapter 6 of this volume, p. 146.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

33. For the source of this distinction, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand," *Worship* 44 (1970), pp. 457–474.