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Readings in Eastern Religion (Review)

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Readings in Eastern Religion. Edited by Harold Coward, Eva Dargyay, and Ronald Neufeldt. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988. Pp. 368.

Reviewed by Stephen Paul Foster, Central Michigan State University

Readings in Eastern Religion is intended to be an introductory anthology of source scriptures for the major religions of South and East Asia including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and some lesser known religions in the West such as Jainism and Sikhism. As in most anthologies, the editors have tried to make this anthology sufficiently broad in its coverage so as to capture the variety and richness of Eastern religious thought, and at the same time render it deep enough in its treatment of a number of particular religious movements so that the reader can come away with at least a minimal understanding and appreciation of each tradition represented.

The section on Shinto, for example, is adequate in length and of particular importance and interest. With Shintoism, in contrast to Buddhism, we see a religion more akin to early Western Christianity and Judaism in its concern with asserting the exclusive truth of its doctrines. In these readings of Shinto texts the ideological origins of later Japanese imperialism in the twentieth century are readily observable. The editors have rightly appended to the section on Shinto readings a copy of the Orders from the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers to the Japanese Government in 1945, ordering the disestablishment of Shinto as a state religion, one which the conquering Allies apparently believed was responsible in great part for Japanese aggression in the 1930s and 1940s.

The texts included for Buddhism and Hinduism are also adequate in length and also develop, as the editors intend, both a thematic and a chronological overview. The readings accurately enough capture the ascetic and otherworldly preoccupations associated with these systems of thought.

Unfortunately, the sections covering other traditions are so abbreviated that from their reading one gathers no significant ideas of what these religions are about. The section on Jainism, for example, made up of a selection of Jaina *sūtras*, is nine pages of text and simply too brief to present adequately the central tenet of that religion: *ahimsā*, noninjury or nonharming of life. The significance of *ahimsā* for the Jainist community, a small but influential Indian sect, has important historical and economic dimensions and deserves more attention. The Jainists,

unwilling even to destroy plant life, were drawn away from the predominant agricultural occupations and sought the world of commerce and business where they became, and remain today, influential and prominent.

A short section (eight pages) on Mao Tse Tung's writing is also included, perhaps at first glance an odd choice for an anthology of Eastern religious writings. However, Mao viewed Marxism as an unconditionally true, fully explanatory account of the world and intended that his rendition of Marx supplant Chinese religious interpretations of human nature and existence. Thus, Mao's inclusion in this anthology is entirely appropriate: there simply needs to be more of Mao in order to capture his importance as a Chinese religious leader. Perhaps the inclusion of his 1937 short essay "On Contradiction" would have helped a student understand how Mao saw traditional Chinese metaphysics, *hsüan-hsüeh*, as an idealistic, and reactionary, element in an oppressive and corrupt social order.

Any anthology should perhaps be viewed as a kind of pedagogical compromise, a means to contend with having to teach subjects like religion and philosophy in a "survey" format. *Readings in Eastern Religion* does a good job with some of the religions it covers. However, it tries to cover too much and is not adequate to a nearly impossible task.