

The Concept of *Zhen* 真 (True, Real) and Its Potential Contributions to Ritual Theory

A Roundtable on Poul Andersen's *The Paradox of Being: Truth, Identity and Images in Daoism*

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Panel Abstract (150 words):

The concept of true/real (*zhen* 真) plays a central role in Daoism. It frequently appears in Daoist ritual manuals expressing the efficacy and outcome of ritual practices. In this roundtable, we explore the question of whether the term *zhen* may have conceptual relevance beyond Daoist studies. To do so, we discuss Poul Andersen's new book, titled *The Paradox of Being: Truth, Identity and Images in Daoism*, which engages in the paradoxical nature of the concept *zhen* in Daoist textual and visual cultures. By pairing scholars of Comparative Religion, Theology, and Confucianism with specialists in Daoist studies, the roundtable accentuates Andersen's unapologetically universalist approach that reads Søren Kierkegaard's idea of truth (*sandhed*) vis-à-vis the Daoist concept of true/real (*zhen*). Hence, Andersen's *magnum opus* will function as an excellent starting point for an intercultural dialogue between Daoist ritual, Existentialism, and the wider field of Religious Studies.

Panel Description (1000 words):

Poul Andersen is arguably the foremost expert on Daoist ritual. For many years, he has spearheaded research in Daoist iconography and ritual practices such as "walking along the guideline" (*bugang* 步綱 or 步罡) and "bodily transformation" (*bianshen* 變身). In 2019, he published with the Harvard University Asia Center his latest book, titled *The Paradox of Being: Truth, Identity, and Image in Daoism*. Combining his life-long interest in Existentialism and the living practice of Daoism, he offers a new avenue to the study of Comparative Religion and Philosophy in his immensely personal *magnum opus*. By focusing on the concept of "true/real" (*zhen* 真) that is so central to Daoist understandings of the Way (*dao* 道) and its powers (*de* 德), Andersen's novel project creates a unified vision of Daoism that transcends its anachronistic and arbitrary division into philosophical and religious strands. At the same time, he "aims for a dialogue between Daoism and modern Western philosophy"

(6) by reading Daoist texts, images, and interviews of Daoist priests together with Existentialist writers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Alain Badiou (b. 1937).

Andersen's main point of conjunction is the fact that both Existentialism and Daoism share the idea that "[t]ruth has to be lived by a subject ... and it is fundamentally different from knowledge" (7). While knowledge refers to objective information expressed in language that can be verified and known, truth refers to a subjective mode of being in relationship to the absolute that is translinguistic and needs to be realized in one's presence. Accordingly, Andersen sees an inherent connection between the Daoist priest's need to perform a bodily transformation in order to realize and activate the true (*zhen*) within her or his body and Kierkegaard's vision of truth (*sandhed*) as "the transformation of the subject in itself" (29), the realization of the absolute in one's subjectivity. In both cases, truth—i.e. the realization of the Dao or Christ in one's presence—is the result of a lived and experienced practice, a subjectivation.

Andersen's book provides various depictions of such subjectivations in form of Daoist rituals and images. For example, he presents an insightful discussion of True Writs (*zhenwen* 真文), Daoist written amulets that "coincide with the fundamental reality of the universe" (100). These writings are paradoxical images (*xiang* 象) that generate an effect on the world by depicting an "abstracted," "meaningless" true form (*zhenxing* 真形) yet, at the same time, make manifest the powers of the true/real (*zhen*) through the act of *mimesis*. This type of subjectivation, however, not only applies to ritualistic objects, but also happens within the body of the Daoist priest. Andersen, for example, discusses in depth the importance of ritual journeys such as the "walk along the guidelines" (*bugang*), which is a ritual "act of unification, establishing cosmic unity and order in the sacred area ... often associated with a state of "oneness" in the high priest" (126), or the "submission of the petition" (*fuzhang* 伏章), in which the Daoist priest ventures on an "inner, meditational journey to heaven to deliver a written prayer to the supreme gods on behalf of the people of the community" (232). In both cases, the Daoist priest transforms her or his body with the help of outer and inner movements, manifests the true/real within their bodies, and merges with the Way (*he yu dao* 合於道), enabling the priest to interact directly with the powers of Daoist gods and the universe.

In this roundtable, we want to celebrate Andersen's scholarly milestone and intellectual dialogue between Daoism and Existentialism by exploring how his universalist reading of Daoist rituals and images offers valuable insights to the field of Daoist studies and beyond. In preparation of the roundtable, four experts from Comparative Religion, Comparative Theology, Confucian Philosophy, and Daoist studies will read Andersen's book together. In a continuous dialogue, they will generate concrete examples from their own research in which Andersen's discussion of the Daoist concept *zhen* and its myriad manifestations in Daoist rituals helped them rethink their own subjects of observation. By presenting these instances to the audience at AAR in Boston, we hope to trigger a fruitful conversation between the panelists, the respondent Poul Andersen, and the audience. By providing both an introduction and critical engagement with *The Paradox of Being*, this roundtable aims to make Daoist ritual more widely accessible to a non-expert audience while underlining the importance of Daoism and its massive treasure trove of rituals for our modern-day discourse on ritual theory.