

Encarta Historical Essays reflect the knowledge and insight of leading historians. This collection of essays is assembled to support the National Standards for World History. In this essay, Richard Foltz argues that the dissemination of religions and spiritual beliefs in Asia occurred hand-in-hand with the development of trade along the Silk Road.

Religion and Overland Trade in Asia, 1000 BC to AD 1400

By Richard Foltz

Beginning centuries ago, many world religions followed a similar pattern of growth and dissemination from west to east along the trans-Asian trade route known as the Silk Road. Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism (a once widespread faith that died out by the 16th century), and Islam were transmitted mainly by traveling merchants and missionaries who joined up with merchant caravans. As new religious communities arose throughout Asia, their continued existence was ensured largely by support from these same merchants. Thus, the relationship of religious traditions to traders was one of dependence; historically speaking, the very idea of world religion is inextricably connected to long-distance commercial activity.

1000 BC to AD 200

The Silk Road hugs the southern edge of the central Eurasian steppe, where the dry flatlands meet the mountains and runoff streams provide a reliable water supply. It was across this ecological transition zone that some human migrants settled and eventually established oasis towns where subsequent travelers could rest, resupply, and trade. The Silk Road acquired its name from the east to west traffic in Chinese silk, which was popular in imperial Rome. In return, merchants brought gold, silver, and wool to China. A silk fragment that was discovered in an Egyptian tomb dating from about 1000 BC is among the earliest evidence of such traffic, but some scholars believe the route was active centuries earlier. The Persians of the steppe probably played a substantial role in conveying products such a vast distance. The ancient Israelites, ancestors of the Jews, also may have traded along the Silk Road. Jewish tradition holds that Israelite merchants traded with China as early as the 10th century BC, during the reign of King David, although this cannot be confirmed. However, it is certain that by 722 BC Israelites lived

in the eastern Iranian world, because their Assyrian conquerors transplanted them there. The patterns of later Jewish commercial activity suggest that Israelites who relocated to Iran probably engaged in trade.

In ancient times, religions did not practice missionary work. Religious traditions typically were viewed as specific cultural attributes, not as universal truths to be adopted by all peoples. For example, the religions of the Iranians and the Israelites spread quite widely throughout the ancient world, but peoples with whom the Iranians and Israelites traded would have perceived their religious influence at best as intriguing foreign ideas, rather than as an ultimate spiritual truth upon which salvation depended. The benefits of a particular religious approach probably were considered the inalienable property of the culture possessing it. For example, while the Chinese clearly believed Iranian priests had special skills in divination, the idea of converting to an Iranian religion would have been meaningless because the priests' spirituality did not entail any doctrine stating its exclusivity with a single god. And yet the Chinese employed Iranian priests until the Mongol period, which began in the 13th century AD.

When Persian king Cyrus liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity in 559 BC, many Jews chose to take up residence within the Persian Empire. In the east this meant joining existing Israelite exile communities. At the same time, these people remained in contact with other Hebraic groups from Babylonia to Egypt, probably through trade. Those living in the Iranian world conveyed various aspects of Iranian culture to those living elsewhere, and in this way many Iranian religious ideas were absorbed into Judaism, and later into Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam. Among these were an *eschatological* (concerned with the end of the world) view of time and the belief in a messianic savior, a bodily resurrection and a last judgement, a heavenly paradise and a hell for sinners, and a supernatural force responsible for evil.

By the 4th century BC, a new religious teaching had taken root in India that, unlike earlier religions, claimed to offer an open and universal path to salvation. Buddhism was

the world's first proselytizing religion, and missionaries traveled far and wide spreading its message. The spread of Buddhism was related directly to long-distance trade. For missionaries, as for anyone else, the only viable means by which to overcome the inherent dangers and difficulties of travel was to join a merchant caravan. In many cases the missionaries were merchants themselves. As Buddhism spread and the tradition of wandering ascetics gave way to the founding of monasteries, the lay followers who supported these institutions financially were often traveling businessmen.

A legend of Theravada Buddhism (one of the two main branches of Buddhism) relates that two traveling merchants from Central Asia encountered the Buddha himself during a trip to India. They were won over by his teaching and returned home to set up the first Buddhist temple along the Silk Road at Bactria (Balkh, in what is now northern Afghanistan). Although this legend cannot be confirmed by historical evidence, it is not implausible, and in later centuries Bactria did become a major Buddhist center. The Silk Road brought influences from both east and west, and it has been suggested that the Mahayana sect of Buddhism, which is dominant in China, Japan, and Tibet, arose not in India but in Central Asia through this constant mutual encounter of cultures and ideas.

Many central features of Mahayana Buddhism display Iranian influences, such as the *soteriological* (salvation) function of bodhisattvas (one who helps others toward salvation) and the association of the Buddha Amitabha with divine light. Beginning with the Central Asian and Indian conquests of Alexander the Great in the 320s BC, Greek influences entered this cultural mix. Representational Buddhist art appears to be derived from Hellenistic traditions, and numerous Greek stories, including the abduction of Ganymede and the tale of the Trojan horse, appear later in Indian Buddhist forms. In the wake of Alexander's armies, it was Greek traders and settlers who served as cultural conduits between India, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean.

The major transmitters of Buddhism to China were the Iranian peoples of Parthia, Bactria, and Transoxiana, whose convenient position between east and west enabled

them to serve as middlemen along the Silk Road. The latter group in particular, known as the Sogdians, established communities along the trade routes from Iran and India all the way into China. To strengthen their relationships with trading partners, they learned local languages and adopted local customs wherever they went. When dealing with Buddhists, they were receptive to their partners' proselytizing. Once converted to Buddhism themselves, they carried the teachings with them and conveyed the new religion to Sogdian and other business associates farther east. This pattern played itself out in later centuries as Sogdian merchants encountered Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam.

It doesn't appear that Buddhism won many converts west of eastern Iran, so any major influences of Indic religious thought on the Mediterranean world had not been demonstrated by the 1st century AD. It is interesting, however, to consider the possible parallels between Buddhism and the next universal faith to arise, Christianity, which also developed a sophisticated and concerted missionary effort early in its history.

The religions of China were not transmitted to the west. As was typical for traditional beliefs, Taoists and Confucians for the most part did not proselytize beyond China because they saw their ideas as integrally connected to Chinese culture. The powerful influence of Chinese thought on other peoples in eastern Asia was largely a function of being the most powerful East Asian civilization.

AD 200 to 1400

Christianity

Many of the first Christians were Jews who spread Christianity through Jewish trade networks based in Babylonia. During the first centuries of the Christian era, doctrinal disputes increasingly led eastern Christians to assert their independence from the leadership of Mediterranean Christianity. By the late 5th century AD the eastern church, with its seat at the Persian capital of Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, broke from the church of Rome. A synod of eastern bishops in 497 declared Nestorianism (a theology that

stated the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ were distinct) to be their official doctrine.

It was this Nestorian form of Christianity that Iranian and Sogdian merchants transmitted eastward across the Silk Road. By the middle of the 600s Nestorian bishoprics were found in Samarqand (central Uzbekistan) and Kashgar (in the present-day Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China). On the steppes, miracle-working Iranian Nestorian priests, whom the Turks perceived as especially powerful shamans, baptized large tribes of Turkish nomads.

In 635 an Iranian-led Nestorian mission arrived at the Chinese imperial court in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), bringing Christian Scriptures with them. These texts, which were soon translated into Chinese, indicate that the merging of ideas and symbols typical of the Silk Road was transforming eastern Christianity. The Scriptures themselves are referred to as sutras, and Christian saints are called buddhas. The title of one text, *Shastra on One Deva*, in essence means "Discourse on the Oneness of God." In 781 the Christian community of Chang'an commemorated its first 150 years by erecting a pillar, the Nestorian monument. The pillar's inscription describes Christian belief in terms borrowed from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

Manichaeism

During the early 3rd century yet another universal, missionary religion emerged from the mixed Semitic-Iranian cultural zone of Mesopotamia: Manichaeism. Its prophet, Mani, was born of Parthian parents into a Jewish-Christian Baptist sect, but he traveled to India in his early 20s and absorbed various influences there as well. His religion drew from Semitic, Iranian, and Indian traditions combined with a belief in *gnosticism* (salvation through secret knowledge). It postulated a radically dualistic universe in which good and evil were locked in constant struggle. Along with certain Buddhist concepts such as reincarnation, Mani adopted Buddhism's four-part social structure, divided between male and female monks and laity.

Mani, who referred to himself as the Apostle of Jesus Christ, briefly enjoyed the support of Persian Sassanid emperor Shapur I. With this official protection he launched a highly successful missionary program. In a short time his teachings attained popularity throughout the Mediterranean and Iranian worlds, posing a severe threat to competing religious visions. His main rival at the Sassanid court was Kartir, the chief priest of the Persian monotheistic religion Zoroastrianism. Kartir strove to make Zoroastrianism the official state religion. Kartir's efforts prevailed, and Mani was thrown into prison where he died in 276 at the age of 60.

Despite the persecution of followers throughout both the Roman and Sassanid empires, Manichaeism continued to spread and win converts. In the east, Sogdian merchants once again played the major role in transmitting the religion along the Silk Road via their communities of traders. A major Manichaean center took root in the Sogdian capital of Samarqand, beyond the reach of the Sassanids. From there Manichaean missionaries traveled to China, where they presented their religion to the court of Chou empress Wu in the late 600s.

In 763 Sogdian Manichaeans living in the city of Luoyang gained an audience with the king of the Uygur Turks, whom the Chinese emperor had invited to help quell a rebellion. The Sogdians returned with the Uygurs to their capital north of the Tien Shan and eventually converted the king to their faith. Under the king's sponsorship Manichaeism became the state religion of the Uygur empire until 840, and for several centuries afterward it retained many Turkish adherents. The largest store of extant Manichaean texts and paintings comes from 10th-century monasteries of the Turfan region in western China. Manichaean monasteries, like those of the Buddhists, derived the bulk of their support from the donations of lay followers, particularly merchants.

In the west, Manichaean missionaries presented their religion as a truer form of Christianity. In the east, they did the same and presented their faith largely in Buddhist

guise. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire after 313, Manichaeans were persecuted as heretics. The persecution was so vigorous that Manichaeism appears to have been largely extinguished in that region by the 6th century, although the influence of Manichaeism is seen later in the medieval movements of the Cathars in Provence (in present day France) and the Bogomils in the Balkans.

In the east, Manichaeism survived until at least the 1500s. A Manichaean temple still exists in the town of Cao'an (Ts'ao-an) near Quanzhou (Ch'üan-chou) in southeastern China, although its attendants now believe the statue of Mani in the courtyard is an image of the Buddha.

Islam

In the early 600s Islam appeared in western Arabia. The prophet Muhammad, who founded Islam, began his career as a traveling businessman. Following his model, Islam has given a higher value to the commercial professions than have other cultural traditions. The Arab conquests followed international trade routes, and as a result Islamic law increasingly ruled the marketplace. By 711 the Arabs had conquered Transoxiana (in southeast Central Asia), and Sogdian merchants again saw the advantages of belonging to a culture with wide-ranging commercial contacts.

Arab trade missions reached China within a few years after Muhammad's death, establishing connections that Persian and Sogdian Muslims later maintained. The Iranian merchant, long a stock figure in Chinese folklore, became an Islamic image, although the Chinese made no distinction between Muslim and Jewish traders.

Adherents of all the western faiths attained positions in China under the Mongols in the 1200s and 1300s, but their fates were tied to their patrons. With the fall of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1368, the period of peace that had so favored trans-Asian trade came to an end. With their connections to cultural centers in the west broken, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism, and Christianity faded from the scene in eastern Asia. Islam

remained a minority faith of Turks and Chinese Hui Muslims. Only Buddhism had adapted and integrated itself sufficiently to remain a vital force within Chinese society.

Six hundred years later, the legacy of the Silk Road is found in the form of stone markings, ancient Buddhist temples, and earthen tombs. The Silk Road also left spiritual beliefs that have come to be known as “world religions,” faiths that found their place in the caravans of east-west trade and over time and land spread throughout the world.

About the author: Dr. Richard Foltz has taught at Columbia University, Brown University, and Gettysburg College.¹

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