

# The Silk Road: Crossroads and Encounters of Faiths

by Azim Nanji and Sarfaroz Niyozov

The Silk Road evokes images of places and peoples linked by the exchange of exotic goods and fabled treasures. This limited notion of commerce, however, overshadows the fact that the Silk Road as a network of trade routes also spread religious ideas and beliefs.

Communities of faith interacted, co-existed, competed, and influenced each other over long periods of time. These include local traditions that evolved in ancient China, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Korea and Japan, and the subsequent larger traditions that arose in the region — Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam — as well as the shamanistic and animistic traditions of various nomadic peoples stretching across Central Asia, some of which still are practiced today. The history of religions along the Silk Road is a remarkable illustration of how beliefs and indeed civilizations often reflect a broad pattern of synthesis, rather than clash.

## Zoroastrianism

Various accounts place Zoroaster's birth sometime between the 11th and the 6th century B.C.E. and somewhere between Mongolia and Azerbaijan. He taught belief in one God (Ahura Mazda), the Lord of Wisdom, and regarded the other Iranian gods (*daevas*) as demons. He also saw an evil force in the Universe called Ahriman (Angra Mainyu). Juxtaposing Ahura Mazda against Ahriman, Zoroaster viewed human life in a cosmology of an eternal dialectical struggle between good and bad. Through this approach emerged profound messages of realism and of a necessary struggle to sustain hope (good) by means of ethical action.

In the 3rd century C.E., long after Zoroaster's death, the Sasanian dynasty began its rule in Iran and embarked on a period of conquest and expansion. It sanctioned Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the state and supported the codification of its texts, practices, and doctrines. Even so, Zoroastrianism continued to interact with and be influenced by local traditions and practices in different regions, and there were a number of rituals that distinguished Central Asian Zoroastrians from their Western Iranian cousins. In Central Asia, for example, the moon was also seen as a divine force. The famous temple of the Moon (Mah) in Bukhara was devoted to its veneration. Similarly, the tradition of a New Year, Nawruz, is a regional ritual that predates Zoroaster.

## Judaism

The Silk Road became a meeting point between Iranian religions and another ancient faith, Judaism. Judaism as expressed in both its ancient oral and written traditions was centered on the belief in one God, who revealed Himself to the people of Israel and made a covenant with them to live according to His will, as articulated in the Torah (the first Five Books of the Hebrew Bible) and concretized as Halakah, or "the way." Part of this ancient history is traced to Abraham, the great Patriarchal figure in Judaism, and his descendants, who were chosen by God to lead the people from slavery to freedom. The well-known event of the Exodus, under the prophetic figure of Moses (ca. 1200 B.C.E.), led to their eventual settlement in Israel, the emergence of a kingdom, and the writing down and codification of the first part of the Scriptures.

In 586 B.C.E., the southern part of the kingdom, Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians, and this led to many Jews being exiled to Central Asia. In 559 B.C.E., the Sasanian ruler Cyrus freed the Jewish population, and, while some returned to Israel, many chose to stay in Iran, where they continued to practice their faith. They also created Jewish settlements along the Silk Road, including in the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Jewish practices and beliefs were enriched by contacts with existing traditions and the intellectual heritage of Iran, and then Greece. Apart from the original community of exiled Jews, it seems that Judaism gained local converts, too, though these were not a result of proselytization. The Jewish presence in the region continues to the present.

## Buddhism

The Silk Road provided a network for the spread of the teachings of the Buddha, enabling Buddhism to become a world religion and to develop into a sophisticated and diverse system of belief and practice. Of the 18 Buddhist schools of interpretation, five existed along the Silk Road. Among these was the less monastic but very significant tradition of Mahayana, which preached the continuity of the Buddha's compassionate nature through bodhisattvas — embodiments of love and teaching who became the bridge to local traditions, communities, and cultures. The tradition suggests that all bodhisattva Buddhist seekers are equal before the Buddha, have a Buddha-nature, and may aspire to reach Buddhahood through right ways of living.

In Central Asia, Buddhism is associated with the rise of the Kushan Empire, which lasted from the 1st to the 3rd century C.E. While Kushan rule marked a significant period in the growth of Buddhism, Kushan coins illustrate more than a narrow adherence to Buddhism. They show that along the Silk Road there were kings and rulers who sought to rise above certain groups, tribes, and religious traditions. Along with figures of their own kings such as Kanishka, Kushan coins depict Buddhist, Greek, and Iranian nobility. Statues made by the Gandharan school also feature a blend of Indian, Greek, and Iranian elements. The rulers built monasteries and temples along the Silk Road that were often used by the faithful of various religions. One such monastery is believed to have been in the famous city of Bukhara, which later





became a major Central Asian cultural center of Islam. The oldest manuscript of an Indian Buddhist text, the *Dharmapada*, has been preserved in the Central Asian Kharosthi script. This combination of patronage, the founding of monasteries, and the rise of Buddhist scholarship produced favorable conditions for the general spread of Buddhism. Rulers, missionaries, monks, and traders all contributed to make Buddhism a very significant presence all over Central Asia.

The greatest success of Buddhism came with its spread to China, where it reinvigorated the existing philosophy, culture, and literature. It also reached Korea and Japan. Its encounter with Daoism and Confucianism helped establish deep roots among the peoples of East Asia. Here Buddhism became a religious and spiritual presence as well as the catalyst for greater links with

Eurasia. Thus, during the first millennium of the Common Era, Buddhism was the strongest influence among the peoples of the Silk Road. Great Buddhist scholars always looked at the Silk Road as a connecting thread with what they regarded as the founding values of Buddhism. Among them was the pilgrim-monk, Xuanzang (595–664 C.E.), who undertook a challenging 16-year journey (629–45 C.E.) towards the West, crossing the

*Dunhuang was an important trading post along the Silk Road in western China for over 1,000 years and also was a center of Buddhist learning. Near the city are almost 500 caves that were hollowed from cliffs as dwelling places, meditation sites, and worship halls for Buddhist monks beginning in the 4th century. These caves house an unparalleled collection of ancient Buddhist art.*

Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. Photo by Neville Agnew, May 1998.

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## Martial Arts along the Silk Road — from Bodhidharma to Bruce Lee

BY DOUG KIM

As a conduit for religion and commerce, the Silk Road was an important means by which Asian martial arts were nurtured and disseminated.

According to tradition, the process started with Bodhidharma, an Indian missionary who introduced Chan Buddhism to China in the 6th century. Called Damo, Tal-ma, and Daruma in China, Korea, and Japan respectively, this monk from India's warrior caste was the progenitor of Shaolin martial arts — many of which have come to be known as kung fu (*gungfu*). To improve the Shaolin monks' physical and mental ability to endure long meditation sessions, he is said to have taught them 18 exercises, probably derived from Indian yoga practices of the period. These "18 Hands of Lohan" were built upon and expanded into Shaolin "boxing." Shaolin temples, often remote and secluded, evolved into centers of meditation and martial arts training; they also attracted soldiers and professional warriors seeking sanctuary, who added their knowledge and skills to the training. Shaolin boxing strongly influenced indigenous martial arts styles as itinerant monks and Shaolin disciples spread religious and fighting principles throughout China and beyond.

It may seem curious that lethal fighting arts were elaborated and regularly practiced by religious orders. However, study and use of these skills were highly valued by the monks — to improve their ability to focus and meditate in their quest for spiritual enlightenment, and for self-defense against road bandits, would-be temple robbers, and, at various times, government persecution. Shaolin missionaries carrying Chan Buddhism eastward not only influenced Korean and Japanese martial arts but also provided the basis for Zen Buddhism, which itself became a fundamental part of the samurai tradition and bushido (the Japanese "way of the warrior"). Numerous guardian figures in fearsome martial poses can be found at Buddhist temples and shrines along the

Silk Road, clearly demonstrating the intimate connection between Buddhism and martial arts.

Commerce played a crucial role as well in the diffusion of Chinese styles to neighboring areas: monks and mercenaries skilled in martial arts served as escorts for merchants traveling along the Silk Road, providing protection against attackers. The recent award-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a classic Chinese tale about such "guards for hire."

Asian martial arts first came to the United States with Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century but remained largely secret, guarded within their community. Although President Theodore Roosevelt took judo lessons from a Japanese instructor in the White House in the early 1900s, it was almost half a century before Asian martial arts started to attract widespread interest in America — the result of contact between American servicemen and Japanese practitioners during the occupation of Japan and Okinawa after World War II. The floodgates of interest burst open as Bruce Lee's kung fu movies hit the United States in the 1970s. Virtually overnight kung fu, judo, karate, tae kwon do, and wu shu schools, clubs, movies, and competitions became well-established parts of everyday American life. Martial arts techniques traditionally taught only to blood relatives or fellow members of religious orders — and never to non-Asians — can now be acquired openly by anyone who wants to learn. Asian martial arts have become staples of international competition; judo and tae kwon do are Olympic sports, and serious efforts are underway to add wu shu to this list.

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Takla Makan and Gobi deserts, the high Pamir Mountains, and also visiting Buddhist monuments in Bukhara, Samarkand, and Herat. Xuanzang returned to China laden with 650 books on Buddhism and provided a colorful account of his journey and the history of Buddhism in the region. He contributed greatly to the survival and spread of Buddhism in East Asia.

### **Christianity**

Along with the growth of Buddhism, the Silk Road nurtured minority groups from other major faiths. Assyrian Christians, or more accurately the Church of the East, were one such group. Often mistakenly identified simply as Nestorianism, the Church was strongest in eastern Syria, where as part of the Persian Empire it gained recognition and subsequently flourished after the arrival of Islam. In Syria, this tradition is a visible presence to this day, attesting to the lasting influence of the Eastern Christian tradition in the region. The Assyrian Christians played a crucial role in the creation of an important intellectual center at Jundishapur, where study of philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and astrology directly influenced Muslim learning. Doctrinally, they shared with other Christian groups the belief in the foundational and redemptive role of Jesus Christ, but they also taught that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures, divine and human, a view that brought the then patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, into conflict with those who held to the doctrine of the inseparability of the two natures of Jesus. Subsequently, the followers of Nestorius were excommunicated and eventually became a separate church with its own distinctive hierarchy, liturgy, and theological tradition.

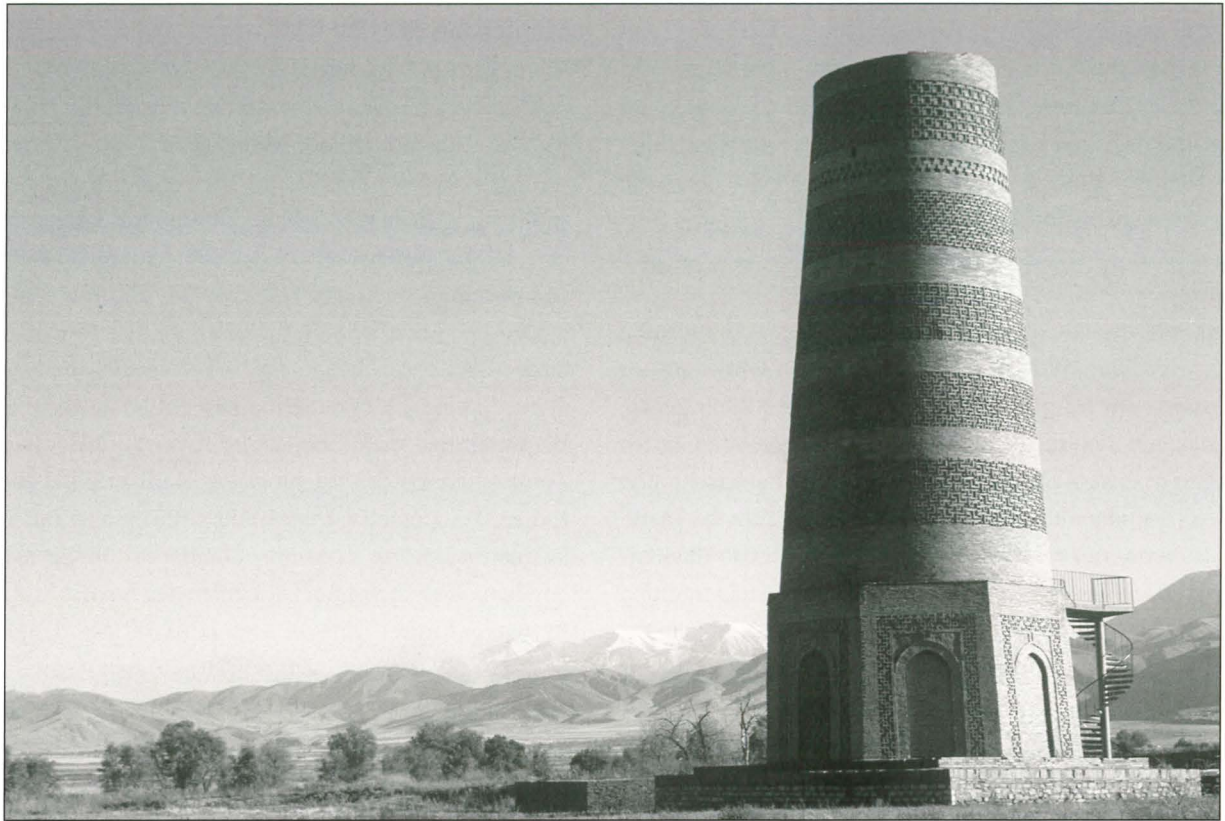
In Central Asia the Assyrian Christians influenced the Sogdians, who, due to their strategic location, had already become the commercial masters of the Silk Road and its cultural transmitters. Sogdian became the lingua franca of the Silk Road, spreading Christianity further east to China and north among the Turks. The Eastern Christians succeeded in three major mass conversions of Turks in Central Asia from the 7th to the 11th centuries. Despite being seen as a faith of foreign traveling merchants, Eastern Christianity gained acknowledgment as “the Brilliant Religion” (Foltz 2000: 72) in China, with Christian saints being referred to as Buddhas and their treatises as sutras.

### **Manichaeism**

Manichaeism, founded by a royal Parthian called Mani (b. 216 C.E.), was another important religion that emerged in West Asia. A gnostic tradition, Manichaeism “posits a radically dualistic view of the universe, in which ‘good’ is equated with spirit and ‘evil’ with matter” (Foltz 2000: 75). The cosmology drew from Iranian figures such as Zurvan, Ahura Mazda, and Ahriman and portrayed good and spirit as light and fire and evil as darkness. Life was a struggle between good and evil in which the former strives to liberate the self from evil matter. Knowledge derived rationally became the basis of an awakening of the self. Blending the major beliefs of Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, the teachings of Mani reached the peoples of India, Mesopotamia, Iran, Central Asia, and China in their own languages and in concepts familiar to them. Central Asian Sogdians with their pragmatic tolerance helped Manichaean ideas to move further east to the land of the Uyghurs, where Manichaean became the official state-sponsored religion for about 70 years. Its powerful appeal, offered as a significant alternative to the other major traditions, resulted in tension and conflict as it gained converts. Yet, despite its appeal, Manichaeism was not able to survive the arrival and dominance of new traditions and was eventually eradicated as a distinct religious tradition, though some of its ideas lived on, assimilated into other faiths.

### **Islam: Arrival and Diffusion**

Islam became the faith of the majority of people along the Silk Road. The first Muslim community emerged in Arabia in the 7th century in a region dominated by ancient civilizations and empires. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, a family man and a merchant by trade, was also committed to a life of contemplation. The revelations that came to him are recorded in Arabic in the Koran (Qur’an), the revealed book of Islam. It affirms a belief in one God, unique and merciful; in past messengers and scriptures sent by God to other societies; in the creation of a society ruled by compassion, charity, and justice that would be a model for all peoples. The initial establishment of Muslim rule in neighboring territories in the 7th and 8th centuries was a result of conquest, but the actual spread of Islam was achieved primarily by



preaching and conversion undertaken by scholars, merchants, and devout men and women. Muslims are taught by the Koran to spread the faith by example, not by compulsion.

The first Muslim expeditions to Central Asia were part of the general pattern of conquest and expansion of territory during the first centuries of Islam. The consolidation of these early attempts at conquest was continued under early Umayyad rule (661–750) and its successor, the Abbasid dynasty, which established its capital in Baghdad in 762. Muslim armies conquered territories beyond the River Oxus (Amu Darya), and by the end of the 9th century the Samanids emerged as the first of the local Muslim kingdoms in the area. The process of conversion and Islamization of Central Asia that accompanied this spread and diffusion of Muslim culture and influence lasted several centuries. As the Silk Road once again became a vital international artery of commerce and trade, Muslim travelers, preachers, mystics, and merchants acted as mediators of faith, enlarging the communities

of Muslims in the various regions of Central Asia.

The famous North African traveler Ibn Batuta (1304–68?), taking advantage of a well-defended and secure pathway along the Silk Road, managed to travel from his hometown of Tangier to China and India, reporting on his travels and illustrating the burgeoning trade, social activity, and vital religious life in the region.

The history of the Silk Road under Muslim influence reveals a diverse religious landscape, among different faiths and also within the Muslim community. Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Muslim groups interacted and flourished together. Charismatic Sufi leaders such as Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166) and Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–89) built communities that nurtured vernacular tradition and languages. The full diversity of Muslim law,

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*The Burana Tower in the Zhu River Valley, Kyrgyzstan, is a minaret from the 11th century, one of the first in Central Asia.*

Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss



theology, culture, arts, and architecture spread across the Silk Road. This multidimensional world of Islam contributed to a broadly based society, bound by common ethical and cultural assumptions but differentiated in its practices and local traditions, that stretched from Afghanistan to Southeast Asia, China, and the Philippines. Some of the greatest scholars of Muslim science and technology lived in the region. The Ismaili Muslims who founded Cairo in the 10th century also spread along the Silk Road and with many other Muslims brought a tradition of philosophical inquiry and scientific knowledge across the Mediterranean to Iran and the Karakoram and the Pamirs (Daftary: 1990). The great Ismaili poet and philosopher, Nasir Khusraw (1004–88), traveled along the Silk Road on a seven-year journey from Balkh across the Middle East, North Africa, and on to his pilgrimage destination, Mecca. His *Safarnamah* (travelogue) describes in vivid detail his meetings with famous scholars and visits to the region's religious communities and sites.

## Conclusion

A historical view of the Silk Road reveals a world in which religions were living traditions. Central Asia, then one of the most pluralistic religious regions in the world, has again become a center of attention, and perhaps the most important lesson learned on the Silk Road — the ideal of religious pluralism and tolerance — may yet enable it to become a bridge between cultures once more.

Some of the oldest inhabited places in the world can be found along the Silk Road. Each faith has left its signature there, in ideas, art, music, and buildings, and in traditions of learning, remembering, celebrating, and sharing. This cumulative resource from different traditions of knowledge and faith can still, as in the past, help us build trust, reinvigorate civilizational dialogue, and move away from the constraints and ignorance that exacerbate division and generate conflict.

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