



Syncretism

By David Rheinstrom and Rosie Friedland, revised by Eman M. Elshaikh (for Khan Academy and WHP)

Is a pizza with pineapple still pizza? Systems of belief, though a heavier subject, have also adapted as trade routes and politics spread new ideas and change.

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A history of cultural exchange

In what is now Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, there sits an ancient Christian cemetery. Its gravestones are marked with a Nestorian cross over a lotus blossom. The inscription on one says, “This is the grave of Jeremiah, the believer.” It gives the Western calendar year of the man’s death as well as “the year of the sheep.” That is the year according to the Chinese Zodiac.

Wait. Why is there a Christian gravestone in Central Asia with the Buddhist sacred flower and the Chinese Zodiac year on it? These graves are examples of a process called *syncretism*. Syncretism is when different belief systems in a place fuse to form something new. Hybrid versions of religions, cultures, and ways of thinking emerge and spread. Syncretism can happen when trade networks or changes in political power bring different groups of people into contact. Let’s consider some historical examples of syncretism during this era.

We can start along the winding trade routes of the Silk Road. It connected the Mediterranean with Central and East Asia. Let’s just say that silk, spices, and diseases weren’t the only things carried along these routes. Nomadic merchants brought philosophies and faiths, too. These ideas changed the communities they encountered. As a Daoist might say, however, just as water changes its shape to fit the vessel, so do faiths and ideologies change to fit the contexts of the cultures that adopt them.

Trade networks and the expansion of classical empires

Throughout history, the growth of empires made the exchange of cultures and ideas more possible. Their trade routes and networks of communication grew and improved as well.

During the Roman Empire, Christianity took some interesting routes as it spread and changed. Early missionaries used Roman roads and the vast imperial trade network. By the eleventh century CE, fully one-third of the world’s Christians lived in Asia.

As Christianity spread, it adapted to local cultures. For starters, the language could change. At the start of the early Church, believers in Jerusalem and Antioch worshipped and wrote their scriptures in Aramaic or Syriac, as well as Greek. As the religion spread west to Rome, the worshippers there adopted Latin. The western church and the eastern church started to differ from each other.



A reproduction of a stone tablet found in a Christian monastery in 13th-century Beijing. By Gary Lee Todd, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Ancient Roman road near Tall Aqibrin in Syria. By Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Map of the Church of the East in the Middle Ages. By Kościół_Wschodu, CC BY-SA 3.0.

By the sixth century CE, many of the Syriac-speaking Christians at the east end of the empire were Nestorians. These people had beliefs the pope in Rome considered heresy. That means they were out of line with accepted teachings. Nestorians stressed the independence of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ.

As Christianity spread farther into Asia, it was often taken there by Nestorian merchants. As it spread, it adapted to other belief systems. For example, a monument from 781 CE in the Chinese imperial capital describes the meaning of Jesus. It does so in Chinese and Syriac, and uses key Buddhist teachings: “[Christ] fixed the extent of the Eight Boundaries [the Eight Consciousnesses of Buddhism], thus completing the truth.”

Buddhism itself was transformed as it spread. The philosophy came to new regions with merchants who were believers. In this way, Buddhism moved right along the Silk Road.

As Buddhism spread, it was adopted within the context of peoples and their communities. The form of Buddhism called Mahayana was much more popular in China than it was in India. Buddhist monks in India engaged in stricter, more severe practices and placed a higher value on meditation. A lifetime of meditation practice was difficult for an ordinary person to achieve. On the other hand, Mahayana, literally meaning “the great vehicle,” had more room in it to be flexible. You could attain salvation in many ways, including acts of devotion. As a result, Buddhism gained a greater foothold in places such as China.

Furthermore, Mahayana adapted to existing cultures and practices. In Mongolia and Tibet, for example, it made room for local beliefs such as the belief in magic. In Tibet, these Buddhists taught that it was possible to attain enlightenment through rituals and incantation. As with Christianity, Buddhism took on new forms based on the diverse contexts of the communities it reached.

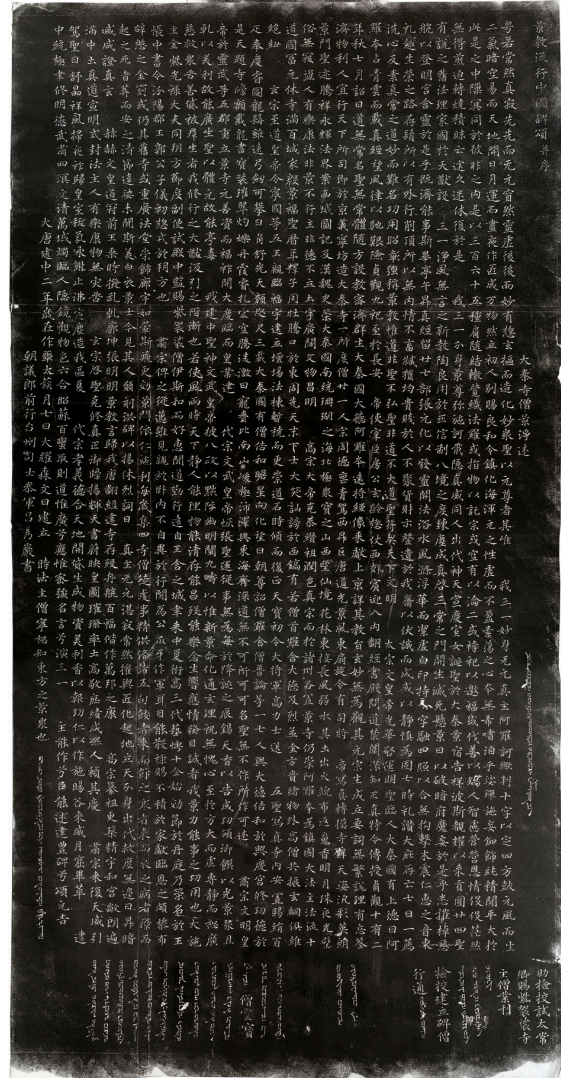
Merging of political and religious authority

For both Christianity and Buddhism, political and religious authority were often mixed. In the fourth century CE, Christianity had been outlawed or barely tolerated. Then Emperor Constantine I made it legal for Christians to practice their faith openly. By the late fourth century CE, Christian Emperor Theodosius established Christianity as the official religion of the empire. He issued decrees controlling what Christians were allowed to believe. They were now able to hold positions of power in government, which improved the perception of the religion among the people. During this time, conversions dramatically increased throughout the empire.

Buddhism also spread and transformed as a result of political power. In third century BCE India, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka converted to Buddhism possibly as a means of uniting his citizens around a common belief system. He sent out missionaries to neighboring kingdoms. The first of these arrived in 250 BCE in what is now Sri Lanka. From there, Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia. Ashoka also sent missionaries to Central Asia, from which the philosophy eventually spread to Tibet and East Asia.

Why does this matter? Well, these missionaries acted as official spokespersons for the philosophy of the imperial government, which gave them access to the rulers in the cities they visited. When a ruler likes what you have to say, it's pretty much the BCE version of having a celebrity re-share your social media post. You get a lot more followers.

History is full of examples of the syncretism of cultures and traditions. Hinduism is a highly syncretic religion that developed centuries before Buddhism. It spread throughout South Asia. In the ancient Middle East, Mesopotamian culture and legal codes influenced the development of Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures. Greek civilization influenced Judaism as Alexander of Macedon's empire spread east.



A rubbing of the Nestorian Stele. Public domain.

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So, let's go back to that Nestorian gravestone in Central Asia. Now we can see why the grave would give both a Western calendar year and a Chinese Zodiac year. Doing business along Silk Road networks allowed ideas, not just goods, to be delivered.



A photo of one of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The sculpture is massive; for scale, a person is standing at the foot of the statue and reaches the statue's ankle. By Phecda109, public domain.

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A photo of one of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The sculpture is massive; for scale, a person is standing at the foot of the statue and reaches the statue's ankle. By Phecda109, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhas_of_Bamyan#/media/File:BamyanBuddha_Smaller_1.jpg



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