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JERRY H. BENTLEY

The Spread of World Religions

In this selection, modern historian Jerry Bentley examines a range of cultural and religious encounters that occurred across Eurasia in the period between 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. He first explores the spread of Buddhism from India northward to China and southward to Southeast Asia, highlighting the importance of merchants and trade in seeding new conversions. According to Bentley, what accounted for the initial resistance to Buddhism in China and the resounding success of Indian ideas and faiths in Southeast Asia? What relationships developed between religious and political leaders that aided the spread of Buddhism? Where do you see instances of cultural exchange?

Bentley then examines the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, from its rocky start as a faction of rebellious Jews to its eventual legalization under the emperor Constantine in 313 C.E. What specific developments does Bentley highlight to explain Christianity's success? What similarities and differences were there between the way Buddhism and Christianity spread?

Thinking Historically

In addition to describing *how* cultures and religions spread throughout Eurasia during this period, Bentley also asks *why*. What makes a people convert to a "foreign" religion? In trying to answer this question, he distinguishes three patterns of religious conversion: voluntary association, syncretism, or assimilation, and conversion by pressure. Obviously, these categories overlap, and it is often difficult to tell whether a conversion is voluntary or coerced. Which of these patterns best describes the spread of Christianity and Buddhism? How useful do you find these categories? Can you think of other patterns of religious conversion?

... Buddhism benefited enormously from the commercial traffic that crossed the silk roads. Once it arrived on the trade routes, Buddhism

found its way very quickly indeed to distant lands. Merchants proved to be an efficient vector of the Buddhist faith, as they established diaspora communities in the string of oasis towns—Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, Kuqa, Turpan, Dunhuang—that served as lifeline of the silk roads through central Asia. (See Map 7.1.) The oases depended heavily on trade for their economic survival, and they quickly accommodated the needs and interests of the merchants whom they hosted. They became centers of high literacy and culture; they organized markets and arranged for lodging, care of animals, and storage of merchandise; and they allowed their guests to build monasteries and bring large contingents of Buddhist monks and copyists into their communities. Before too long—perhaps as early as the first or even the second century B.C.E.—the oasis dwellers themselves converted to Buddhism.

Thus a process of conversion through voluntary association with well-organized foreigners underwrote the first major expansion of Buddhism outside India. Buddhist merchants linked the oases to a large and cosmopolitan world, and the oases became enormously wealthy by providing useful services for the merchants. It is not at all surprising that inhabitants of the small oasis communities would gradually incline toward the beliefs and values of the numerous Buddhist merchants who traveled the silk roads and enriched the oases.

Once established in oasis communities, Buddhism had the potential to spread both to nomadic peoples on the steppes of central Asia and even to China, a land of long-settled civilization with its own long-established cultural traditions. Buddhism realized this potential only partially, however, and only in gradual fashion. As a faith foreign to China and generally despised by Chinese during its early centuries there, Buddhism had a certain attraction for nomadic peoples who themselves had quite difficult relations with the Chinese. In other words, Buddhism exercised a kind of countercultural appeal to nomads who loathed the Chinese, but who also desired and even depended upon trade with China. Yet many nomadic peoples found it difficult to accept Buddhism; they did not have traditions of literacy to accommodate Buddhist moral and theological teachings, and their mobility made it impossible to maintain fixed monastic communities. As a result, many nomadic peoples held to their native shamanist cults, and others turned to Manichaeism¹ or Nestorian Christianity.² Meanwhile, some of those

¹man ih KEE ih zuhm Third-century Persian religion; belief that the body is trapped in darkness searching for the light. [Ed.]

²fifth-century Syrian faith that spread to India, central Asia, and China; belief in the human nature of Jesus. [Ed.]

Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47–53, 60–64.

