IMPERIAL CONVERSION: WHEN EMPIRE CO-OPTS RELIGION

by

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ABSTRACT

JORDAN SHARP
IMPERIAL CONVERSION: WHEN EMPIRE CO-OPTS RELIGION
Under the direction of ROBERT N. NASH, Ph.D.

Many religions have been significantly changed by the conversion of an empire to that religion, yet imperial conversion has received little attention within religious studies. Consequently, the goal of this study is to better understand imperial conversion by investigating (1) why empires convert, (2) what makes conversion possible, and (3) how the empire enacts conversion. To do so, this study compares three imperial conversions representing different religions, eras, and cultures: Ashoka’s Buddhist conversion of the Maurya Empire, the Christian conversion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, and Gao Zu’s role in the rise of Daoism in China’s Tang Dynasty.

Methodologically, the study is interdisciplinary. First, a historical overview of each conversion explores what factors precipitated conversion as well as how the conversion benefited the empire. Next, sociology is applied to understand what made the conversions possible. Using Emile Durkheim’s concept of the sacred totem and Max Weber’s concept of theodicy, the study examines how the empire promoted pro-imperial values by co-opting symbols that appealed to society’s values concerning sacredness and morality. Finally, cultural anthropologist Talal Asad’s work on power within religion
offers a way to understand how the empires enacted the conversion; imperial conversion required a negotiation of power between political and religious authorities.

One of the central findings is that imperial conversion is primarily politically motivated, serving a specific goal of the empire. Additionally, the conversion itself, though historically significant, is not as radical as it may seem. Rather than a drastic change in religious devotion, imperial conversion represents a shift: the empire alters policy to better reflect the current values of society and/or to steer societal values in a slightly different direction. Further, imperial conversion is a two-way exchange, meaning that imperial conversion changes the religion as much as, if not more so, as the empire.

In addition to the insights about imperial conversion, the study presents new questions about how religion is studied and defined. The concluding section offers recommendations for future study on the boundaries of what constitutes religion, how to describe and better understand religious change, and the interaction between religion and politics.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Although scholars have written about the ‘founders’ and ‘founding’ of different religions, the underlying assumption that these two categories universally apply to all religions is problematic, if not incorrect entirely.¹ What most often happens is ‘founding’ and ‘founder’ is taken from one specific religion, typically Christianity, which becomes a prototype artificially imposed on other religious traditions, whether or not the model fits.² A cursory examination of the genesis of Christianity, Hinduism, and Daoism, for example, immediately presents problems which call into question whether religious ‘founder’ exists as a descriptive category at all, or even a helpful lens for studying religion.³ A better approach is to begin with the historical data instead of a categorical definition, and then create definitions and theories based upon that data.

The initial research for this thesis emerged from an exploration of the ‘founder’ quest described above as a lens for studying religion, which also resulted in the discovery of the issues described above. Rather than abandoning the topic altogether, I decided to look for some aspect common to several traditions. Many different religions did share something in common crucial to their formation: the moment when an empire adopts a

² Ibid., 3.
³ Ibid.
religion. This moment, though manifested and enacted in different manners, not only occurred in the history of most major religions, but also had a profound effect on each religion. When understood as a time period rather than a single moment, religious ‘founding’ or ‘formation’ appears to have a common, or perhaps even universal, similarity.

**THESIS QUESTION**

This thesis will examine the moments of imperial conversion\(^4\) in the development of a religion. As an event widely shared among religions, imperial conversion provides a better entry point to understanding religious founding. The goal of this thesis is to use this information in order to better understand the formation of religion, as well as provide insight into the nature of religion itself.

Specifically, this thesis will aim to answer “why do large, powerful empires undergo religious conversions, how do they enact these conversions, and what do these conversions teach about the formation of a religion?” The answers to these questions can provide new insights into the development of religions, the political role of religion, and the effects religion has on a society. While the precise details of these conversions manifest differently, they share overarching motivations and results. The exploration of these events will focus on three specific aspects: the pre-conversion social and political contexts, the cultural values of the societies, and the role of structural power.

While there are dozens of these events, space limitations dictate a focus on just three examples: Constantine’s Christian conversion of the Roman Empire, Ashoka’s

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\(^4\) A thorough definition of ‘imperial conversion’ is provided later in this chapter.
Buddhist Conversion of the Indian Maurya Dynasty, and Gao Zu’s Daoist conversion of China’s Tang Dynasty. These three examples come from different regions, religious traditions, and time periods and also represent three of the world’s largest religions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As previously mentioned, religious founders have been the subject of much research within religious studies. Imperial conversion, though not ignored, is not often studied as its own category, nor is it given equal credit in describing the formation of a religion. These conversions often play a vital role in shaping the religion.

Based upon historical, religious, and cultural research of these imperial conversions, I will offer a new way of understanding religion and its formation, albeit an introductory and brief one. This thesis will not be primarily a historical description, nor will it be an interpretation of the history. Instead, this thesis will compare the events to explore the questions listed above. Prior extensive knowledge of these events, though helpful, will not be required to understand this thesis.

METHODOLOGY

While an extensive list of historical examples is ideal, space limitations necessitate a smaller representative sample. Three examples, however, are a necessary minimum for a work of this nature. As argued by Jonathan Z. Smith, using two sources in a comparative study is both inadequate and problematic.\(^5\) Comparing two religions is too small a representative example to make any overarching claims about the nature of

religion. Further, when using two examples, differences, nuances, and inconsistencies are often missed, smoothed over, or altogether ignored. Using three examples provides a better representative sample, and by nature allows for a better articulation of nuanced differences and similarities as well as deeper insight into the examined phenomenon.\textsuperscript{6}

The examples taken from Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism represent different cultural, historical, and religious contexts. They are also well suited for the study because, aside from being imperial conversions, they vary in almost every way, including the details of how the conversions took shape.

I will not limit the historical data to only explicitly religious information, but will employ an interdisciplinary approach by drawing from political, historical, and sociological insights. Information from other academic disciplines is crucial for understanding the complex nature of imperial conversions. The research will include both evidence used in other arguments and the conclusions made in these arguments.

The goal of the comparisons is not simply to describe or list overlaps and discrepancies; instead, the thesis will use this data to articulate a “deep and surface” structure of a particular aspect of religion. This linguistic-style methodology is borrowed from Noam Chomsky’s theory of language, Universal Grammar. Universal Grammar states that there are linguistic universals which are true of all languages even though they manifest in an infinite number of ways.\textsuperscript{7} For example, all languages have verbs and

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Bergmann Anourschka, Kathleen C. Hall, and Sharon M. Ross, eds., Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics, 10\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 311-15.
syntactic rules, even though any two languages can have completely different syntactic rules or ways of modifying verbs. This is sometimes described as deep (the linguistic universals) and surface (an individual language’s specific expression) structure. The result is that by studying various expressions, or surface structures, one can distill a universal aspect about the overall category, the deep structure.

This methodology provides the benefit of a logical and systematic approach to inquiry leading to descriptive theories that are better representatives of the overall subject of religion. One weakness is that Universal Grammar is a biologically-endowed trait common to all humans, whereas religion is not. If religion as a category or distinct entity does exist across spatial and temporal boundaries, then it must have common features, or deep structures. In order to use this methodology, the beginning assumption is ‘religion’ as a category does in fact exist. This assumption, rather than being a weakness, is beneficial in two distinctive ways. First, even if the starting assumption is that religion does in fact exist, the conclusion does not necessarily have to support this assumption. If the research does not find any underlying or universal aspects, then religion, as a category in which specific religions are a part, does not exist. Second, the conclusion is not

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8 In Linguistics, deep and surface structure actually refers to a different concept. The concept of Universal Grammar, however, has been applied to many other disciplines, and in the process most often used the idea of deep and surface structure, similar to how it is used in this context.

9 This is a debated assumption within Religious Studies; see Smith, Relating Religion, 168-169.

10 Saying ‘religion’ does not exist, does not mean specific religions do not exist. It means that the category of ‘religion’ does not exist, at least to the extent that is accurately descriptive of the things it is defining.
bound by the initial assumptions; the initial assumptions are tested and then supported, altered, or refuted by the research.

The goal of deep-surface structure methodology is to examine what can be accurately described, and from that data determine what can be concluded, if anything. Although some initial assumptions are required for practical purposes, the validity of those assumptions requires verification through the examination process. In summary, research begins with a working definition of the term ‘religion’ and what concepts, or ‘religions,’ fit within that category. Then, the research tests these assumptions against what the religions demonstrate; the assumptions are a starting point, not a forgone conclusion.¹¹

Lastly, two terms related to methodology should be defined: religion and imperial conversion. Since the nature of this study is an exploration of what religion is, a comprehensive definition of ‘religion’ belongs not in the introduction, but the conclusion. For practical purposes, however, a working definition of the term is necessary. American anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines religion as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹²

¹¹ This proposed methodology is not an entirely novel or brand-new way of approaching the study of religion. It is analogous and very similar to the sociological approach. See Ronald L. Johnstone, Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1997), 1-7.

As this definition is dense and technical, if not cumbersome, a simplified distillation is that religion is a group of symbols that evoke emotion and action, offers grand explanations about life, gives a part of life special status, and focuses on the most important aspects of life. This definition acknowledges the symbolic nature of religion, without ignoring the importance, practicality, and tangible aspects of religion which affect individuals’ daily life.

The scope of religion in this thesis is not regulated to only the symbolic or ‘sacred.’ As Richard Horsley argues, the modern scope of religion silos it categorically from all other aspects of life, which is a product of the Enlightenment. Before the Enlightenment’s narrowing of the term, religion was inseparable from politics, economics, culture, and day-to-day life. While in many modern Western contexts religion has been regulated to only include individual belief, such understanding is inaccurate and anachronistic when applied to other contexts. As a result, this thesis will expand the scope of religion to include the holistic understanding as articulated by Horsley.

Finally, ‘imperial conversion’ is a term coined to describe a broad historical phenomenon or period when an empire implemented or enforced new laws or practices having to do with a specific religion. These decisions significantly changed and/or elevated the status of a religion, and usually included compulsory actions or behaviors.

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related to that religion. By this definition, a new law regarding a religion which did not significantly affect its status, an action that did not shift the power hierarchy of one or more religions, a religious mandate that did not have political affects, or a political decision that did not significantly affect religion would not be defined as an imperial conversion.

THESIS OUTLINE

Chapter two will address the question of why the empires converted by examining the social, political, and religious context. Since any political decision is a response to a particular issue, the focus will be on the specific contextual aspects and problems that precipitated the conversion. Understanding the issues that the empires faced points to how the imperial conversion presented a solution.

Chapters three and four will look at how the conversions were possible and why they were successful. Three will focus on the way that the conversions appealed to key cultural values by using Emile Durkheim’s theory of the sacred totem and Max Weber’s theory of religious theodicies. Chapter four will examine how the emperors used their structural power in order to create symbolic change. This chapter will use Talal Asad’s work on the role of power and context.

Finally, the last chapter will demonstrate the role imperial conversions play in the formation of a religion, what imperial conversion can teach about religious founding, and what imperial conversion can teach about the nature of religion itself.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

At the time of Ashoka’s, Constantine’s, and Gaozu’s rise to power, each emperor needed to legitimize their power and authority during a period of great disunity. Political instability, competing loyalties, and shifting social dynamics all stood as obstacles which neither military power nor political maneuvering could overcome. To a large extent, the religious devotion of the people was connected to the issue, but would also become the solution: in other words, religion was both the problem and the solution. The specific details of the contextual realities and of the religious policies are vitally important to understand because the latter were a direct response to the issues caused by the former. Imperial conversion offered a solution to the issues of the empire, a divine endorsement of the emperor’s authority, and a symbol of imperial identity to unify the people.

ASHOKA’S MAURYA EMPIRE

Chandragupta (r. 321-297 BCE) not only defeated and expelled the last of the Greek generals who remained after Alexander the Great’s conquest, but also united almost all of the Indian continent under one empire for the first time.\(^1\) His grandson, Ashoka, expanded the empire even further via a devastating war conquering the Kalinga

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kingdom in 260 BCE. According to legend, the violence of this war was the direct cause of Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism.\textsuperscript{2}

At the time of Ashoka’s rise, Buddhism was a relatively small sect in Indian, though its popularity was growing. Vedic Hinduism, controlled entirely by the Brahmin priestly caste, dominated the majority of the empire.\textsuperscript{3} Brahmin priests’ leadership, control, and influence was as pervasive as it was localized. The religion centered on Vedic animal sacrifice, which was solely controlled by the local Brahmin priest. Thus, the local priest was the religious authority, and, as an extension, the de facto political authority.\textsuperscript{4} The near absolute autonomy paired with the pervasive influence of the local Vedic priest undermined centralized authority and national identity.

The disunity and fractured nature of the Indian continent was further exacerbated by its historical division. When Ashoka inherited the Maurya Empire, he was ruling peoples who had previously never lived under common rule. Added to this division, the Kalinga, who were just brutally defeated in war with over 200,000 deaths, were now also a part of this newly formed empire.\textsuperscript{5}

Ashoka’s Religious Policy

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{3} Bruce Rich, \textit{To Uphold the World: A Call for a New Global Ethic from Ancient India} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 20-21.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 116.

After Ashoka’s conquest of Kalinga and conversion to Buddhism, he issued a series of edicts detailing his new law and philosophy inscribed on stone pillars erected throughout the empire. Ashoka’s new philosophy was ‘conquering via dhamma’ instead of by military power. Ashoka’s specific dhamma was explicitly Buddhist, but significantly deviated from contemporary Buddhist teaching.\(^6\) His dhamma, as described by the stone edicts, concerned both political and religious matters.

Despite the preferential treatment of Buddhism, the official religious policy was liberty for all religions.\(^7\) Buddhism received special status through the building of Buddhist shrines, stupas, and monasteries, which were the first Buddhist structures constructed. Additionally, Buddhist missionaries were sent throughout the kingdom and beyond, from Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean, many of whom were successful in spreading the faith.\(^8\) Although Buddhism received disproportionate support, Ashoka also financially supported temples and shrines for Jainism and Hinduism.

Ashoka elevated the status of Buddhist monasteries and clergy socially and politically within his new empire. Priests became official agents of the empire, serving as bureaucrats, police, and spies. The monastery became the center of not only religious life, but civic life as well, serving as hospitals, water sources, and civic centers.\(^9\) Ashoka

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\(^6\) McLeod, *The History of India*, 24.

\(^7\) Bruce Rich, “To Uphold the World: What Two Statesmen from Ancient India can Tell Us about Our Current Crisis,” *Tikkun* vol. 26 is. 2 (Spring 2011): 8.

\(^8\) SarDesai, *India*, 73-3.

constructed a well-organized bureaucratic and efficient state practically from scratch. It included new social services, from agricultural assistance to education to healthcare, all funded by the state. The Buddhist monasteries were the center and conduit of all these social services, as well as flourishing centers of trade.\textsuperscript{10}

Although religious tolerance was the official law, there was one aspect central to Ashoka’s dharmma that significantly undermined Vedic religion: strict non-violence. Ashoka explicitly prohibited violence against humans and animals, which effectively outlawed the local Vedic religions centered, which often included animal sacrifice.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, the biggest threat to imperial authority and loyalty was neutralized and replaced by the Buddhist monastery, which also happened to be the local manifestation of the imperial state.

Contrary to many Western perceptions of Buddhism’s ascetic nature, Ashoka astutely recognized the immense power Buddhism possessed as a political instrument. It encouraged greater religious participation of the whole population; the system required equal participation from, and benefit for, both clergy and laity.\textsuperscript{12} Under the Buddhist monastery system, the laity contributed resources, such as money and food, to the clergy, who in return bestowed spiritual blessings and physical benefits on the laity, which created a symbiotic, self-sustaining system of equal participation.

\textsuperscript{10} SarDesai, \textit{India}, 74.

\textsuperscript{11} Rich, \textit{To Uphold the World}, 116.

CONSTANTINE’S ROMAN EMPIRE

Beginning with the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE), the emperor cult was a staple of Roman life which served two indispensable political functions: embodiment of the rules and upholding the “socio-symbolic structure by which Roman society defined itself.” 13 Rather than swearing loyalty to the state, the emperor cult initiated individuals by swearing loyalty to the Emperor himself, who was the embodiment of the state. This religious ceremony was a brilliant political move since “everyone was engaged in empowering and maintaining the state’s foremost authority, Rome’s emperor.” 14

This system crumbled in the nearly fifty years of civil war in the late third century. When the civil war ended, the office of Augustus was restored under Diocletian, but with a significant modification: the tetrarchy, or rule of four, was inaugurated with two Augustus, Diocletian and Maximian, and two deputy Caesars, Galerius and Constantius. 15 With four emperors, a new religious hierarchy developed and elevated the highest title even further. Diocletian became divine to the point of being wholly removed and entirely separate from his subjects. Rather than strengthening imperial authority, this undermined the original concept of primus inter pares, first among equals, which


14 Ibid., 45.

15 Ibid., 88.
gave the people a (fictional) belief in having access and relationship to the Emperor and a (fictional) voice in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{16}

The authority of the Emperor cult faced another rapidly growing threat: Christianity. Refusing to participate in Emperor worship was a treasonous act, which if not controlled could undermine the whole system. In Rome’s view, killing Christians was not persecution, but punishment for insubordination and treason, which Rome was effective and experienced in handling. Given Rome’s history of brutality, the persistent growth of this relatively small religious sect should be surprising. The reason for Rome’s failure in stamping out the movement was, ironically, the public executions themselves. Christians welcomed their deaths as a sacrifice of highest honor. Previously, the soldier and gladiator were the symbolic ideal embodiment of Roman virtue, courageously sacrificing life for the empire. Now, the martyr’s execution appropriated this public enactment of virtues. Rome’s decision to publically execute coupled with Christians’ welcoming of martyrdom accidently turned subversive commoners into ideal Romans.\textsuperscript{17}

The first transfer of power under the tetrarchy system succeeded peacefully, but only briefly. Constantius and Galerius replaced Maximian and Diocletian, but Constantine and Maximin, the sons of Constantius and Maximian, were not promoted to the role of Caesar, which would soon send the empire into civil war again. The details of the imperial titles, alliances, and wars that took place between 303 and 325 are immensely complicated, but are briefly summarized as follows: in 306, Maxentius,

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 90-91.
Licinius, and Constantine were the most powerful emperors. Busy fighting Maxentius and others, Constantine and Licinius agreed to split rule of the empire in 313. This agreement deteriorated quickly, descended into war between the two, with Constantine winning and becoming the sole emperor in 325, the first time in almost a century.\(^{18}\)

**Constantine’s Religious Policies**

Although he adeptly maneuvered his way into sole rule, Constantine’s religious policies were pivotal in his consolidation of power. Constantine used Christianity to gain support, divinely legitimize his rule, and bring unity and order to the empire. He achieved these goals by giving Christians land and money, resolving a theological debate, elevating the status of the church, and bestowing church leaders with political power.

One famous examples of Constantine’s imperial conversion is the Edict of Milan, where he and Licinius officially agreed to offer religious tolerance to Christians throughout the Roman Empire. This edict, however, never happened, despite its popularity in history books. A careful examination of the surrounding historical events reveals why such an edict never needed to be issued. Ever since Constantine was first declared emperor by his army in 306, he had been returning confiscated land and offering religious tolerance to Christians, which afforded him great loyalty in regions under his command.\(^{19}\) It would make no sense for Constantine to issue an edict in 313 of a policy he had already enacted. This fictional story’s place within the historical record remained

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 94.
because it served the mythological narrative of Constantine’s Christian conversion; the emperor and the church alike benefited from the narrative regardless of its factuality.

Soon after his consolidation of power, Constantine famously organized and oversaw the council of Nicaea in 325. Resolving the Arian controversy seemed to the newly Christian emperor a simple way of establishing unity. Much to his surprise, he immersed himself in a fight that was primarily a party-politics-style split. The result of the council, at least on the surface, reunified the church, and Constantine received much of the credit for its success.\(^{20}\)

Constantine was credited with enacting many other religious and political reforms, some historical, others questionable. Those historically attested and relevant to this study are as follows: (1) Sabbath: Sunday became a day of rest from official business, the first official law of this kind. (2) Financial rights: in addition to the restoration of property offered to Christians, churches, and families of martyrs affected by past persecutions, clergy were exempt from curial taxes. Many churches were founded by or financially supported by the government as well. (3) The elevation of bishops: bishops were elevated to such a high level that their power soon began to undermine imperial authority, beginning as soon as Constantine’s own reign. Specifically, church councils were pronounced divinely inspired and legally binding, bishops had the unique right of trial only by their peers with the added condition that excommunication and exile were the limits of punishment, and bishops had quasi-judicial powers. (4) Rights of Jews: previously, Jews received religious toleration. Adopting the

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 120-24.
entrenched anti-Semitism of the church, Constantine initiated laws restricting the legal and religious rights of Jews. Labelled “murders of the Lord,” Jews were forbidden from circumcising their slaves, owning Christian slaves, converting Christians to Judaism, and preventing Jews from converting to Christianity.\textsuperscript{21}

**CHINA’S TANG DYNASTY**

Although a number of dynasties existed between the Han (206 BCE – 220 CE) and the Tang (618-907 CE), none of them compared to the Han in size, strength, or stability. The four centuries preceding the Tang were marked by external and internal warfare, instability, and a fractured China primarily ruled by foreign leaders. The Tang dynasty practically and symbolically restored the former glory of the Han dynasty.\textsuperscript{22} It ushered in a zenith in Chinese civilization as a golden age of culture, technology, and art. The territory it encompassed included regions which had not been united under one ruler since the Han.

**Religion in China**

When describing religion in China, there are two approaches often employed, each at opposite ends of a spectrum and equally misrepresentative. At one end of the spectrum, every religion in China is considered wholly independent, separate, and mutually exclusive of one another. At the other end of the spectrum, all borders and boundaries are eliminated, and all that is left is a variety of syncretic and localized

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 131-39.

\textsuperscript{22} Mark Edwards Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, History of Imperial China, ed. Timothy Brook (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 1-3.
religions and philosophies. In reality, both are partially false and partially true, but also miss the mark. There were Buddhists who were definitively not Daoists, and vice versa, but both religions adopted and borrowed from one another heavily.

A distinctly Confucian religion, that was truly religious and not just a political philosophy was not yet fully developed, and would not really be so until the neo-Confucianism movement towards the end of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). Confucian philosophy, ethics, and politics, however, were deeply ingrained in the fabric of society, but were relegated almost entirely to the elite class. This exclusion existed because of the highly intellectual nature of Confucianism, to which only the elite and wealthy had access. Further, Confucian values primarily served the interests of the elite, especially when compared to the majority of agrarian China.

Buddhism came to China via the Sogdians in the second century CE. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE) and the Sui Dynasty (581-681 CE), Buddhism flourished, so much so that it was one of the largest religions at the birth of the Tang Dynasty. Chinese Buddhism differed because of its heavy borrowing from local Chinese cult religions and Daoism.

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24 Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 225.


26 Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 214-17.
The roots of Daoism in China go all the way back to at least the fourth century BCE, with the earliest formation of Daoist religion originating in the late Han Dynasty.\textsuperscript{27} By the seventh century, Daoism was deeply ingrained in Chinese society both philosophically and religiously. After the fall of the Han Dynasty, Daoism spread rapidly especially among the non-elite class.\textsuperscript{28} The Han Dynasty’s collapse and the ensuing instability of four centuries sparked a negative sentiment towards Confucian politics; the concept of an ideal society governed by Confucian politics, philosophy, and ethics had failed, sparking cynicism as well as growing trust in Daoism to fill the void. Daoism became the sanctuary, the unifying fabric, the new locus of Chinese identity. It also offered hope for the future by adopting an apocalyptic flavor, which longed for the restoration of the Realm of Great Peace.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Gao Zu’s Rise to Power and Religious Policies}

Emperor Gao Zu’s rise to power, the establishment of the Tang Dynasty, and the emergence of new religious policies are all interrelated entities which built upon and reacted to the religious and cultural trends in China. The Tang Dynasty was officially established in 618 by Gao Zu’s deal with the Turks, which secured the empire’s western border; this treaty elevated the house of Li (Gao’s lineage) and allowed Gao Zu to focus


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 54-56.
on constructing his government as well as securing the rest of China.\textsuperscript{30} The Tang Dynasty was established \textit{symbolically} by the authority bestowed on Gao by the proclamation of his title and lineage. First, Gao claimed that the Li family was directly descended from Lao Tzu himself – a fact that is historically doubtful at best. The Li family was most likely not even truly ‘Chinese.’\textsuperscript{31} Second, Gao’s title as the Emperor of Great Peace was an explicit reference to the greatly anticipated Daoist apocalyptic figure who would be the restorer of the Realm of Great Peace.\textsuperscript{32} Politically, the Tang Dynasty reestablished the long-lost ideal Chinese empire, modeled after the Han Dynasty. Religiously, Gao was the long awaited religious figure of the most central and distinctly Chinese religion.

Gao Zu rode the tide of Daoist support by making Daoism the official state religion. Daoists priests and scholars were appointed to official positions at court. The state also began an ambitious campaign of funding, embellishing, and building Daoist monasteries and temples throughout the empire.\textsuperscript{33} This period of state patronage transformed Daoism from a popular sect, to a fully institutionalized religion. In the process, Daoism adopted many of the rites, rituals, and practices of Buddhism to help institutionalize it as a formal religion.\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{30} Wolfram Eberhard, \textit{A History of China} (London: Routledge, 2005), 176.
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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{32} Seidel, “Taoism,” 56.
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\textsuperscript{33} Lewis, \textit{China’s Cosmopolitan Empire}, 208.
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The dynasty’s religious patronage was not limited to Daoism; Buddhism and Confucianism were officially venerated as well, but secondarily to Daoism. This was a practical decision motivated by a need to control and win the favor of as many people as possible. Buddhism and Confucianism were far too popular for a newly established dynasty to oppose. Instead, Gao supported them, but more importantly put them under the control of the state. This allowed for a specifically targeted reform of the ‘foreign religion’ of Buddhism. Although Chinese Buddhism had already borrowed heavily from Daoist beliefs, under Tang patronage Buddhism became a truly Chinese religion. During this period, important writings from Buddhist scholars at the imperial court, rewrote the story of Buddhism’s origin, claiming that the Buddha was from China and traveled from China to India to establish his religion. The only religions that Gao Zu opposed were ‘unofficial religions,’ which were most often traditional Chinese religions.

**DEFINING SUCCESS**

The benefit of history’s hindsight makes the evaluation of success easier. While the implicit assumption has been that the conversions were successful, the term ‘success’ deserves a closer examination. Examining the lasting effects presents issues if success is understood as permanently changing the religious devotions of the empire or as establishing a stable, long-lasting empire.

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Asoka’s reign marked the height of the Maurya Empire and of Buddhism’s prominence on the Indian subcontinent, but both faded soon thereafter\textsuperscript{37}; the Maurya empire crumbled as soon as Asoka passed his rule to his sons and his reforms fell with it. Further while Buddhism remained in India and spread to other regions, it has never again held the same level of privilege or popularity in India.\textsuperscript{38} While Christianity did come to spread and dominate Western Europe for centuries thereafter, Constantine’s reunification of the Roman Empire was short lived; the empire split in 395 CE and the west effectively fell with the sacking of Rome in 410.\textsuperscript{39} Gao Zu inaugurated the Tang Dynasty, which lasted for nearly three centuries and marked a golden age in China’s power, influence, and culture. The legacy of the emperor’s religious policies, however, were diminished during the dynasty. Buddhism was heavily persecuted, and even outlawed at times, and would never again be as influential in China.\textsuperscript{40} Further, the subsequent dynasties birthed Neo-Confucianism, which eclipsed the Tang Dynasty’s preferential treatment of Daoism.\textsuperscript{41} In this regard, the three conversions’ ‘success’ match most similarly in one area: consolidating power and unifying an empire at a time of crisis during the reign of the emperor.

\textsuperscript{37} SarDesai, \textit{India}, 74.

\textsuperscript{38} McLeod, \textit{The History of India}, 25.

\textsuperscript{39} Barnes, \textit{Constantine}, 101.


\textsuperscript{41} Kirkland, “The History of Taoism,” 185.
CONCLUSION

Despite the immense size and power of the third-century BCE Maurya empire, the fourth-century CE Roman empire, and the seventh-century CE Tang Dynasty, Ashoka, Constantine, and Gao Zu each came to power at a time of great divide and disunity. Each emperor turned to religion, though not necessarily in a pious sense, as the solution to their problems. Although they were monumental, these imperial conversions were not divine ‘miraculous’ events appearing out of nowhere or in a vacuum. The conversion of these powerful empires served a specific purpose: each emperor changed religious policy to legitimize their power and position, gain loyalty, and construct an imperial identity.
CHAPTER THREE
CULTURAL VALUES

The descriptions of the imperial conversions in the previous chapter demonstrated how Ashoka, Constantine, and Gao Zu used religion to address the issues their empires faced. While these conversions were successful, it is not hard to imagine imperial conversions utterly failing in other contexts. Changing religious beliefs, whether by persuasion or compulsion, is a difficult and risky task on the individual level, much more so when dealing with a large group. Successfully converting an empire while also having that conversion achieve an intended purpose necessitated careful consideration and execution. Emile Durkheim’s concept of the sacred totem and Max Weber’s theodicies of fortune/misfortune can help explain why these particular conversions were effective.

First, by promoting what their societies already highly valued, their sacred totem, the three emperors appealed to the already existent values of their societies. Second, the new religion directly responded to the suffering of the largest section of society - addressing their theodicy - thus giving the people a reason to embrace it.

DURKHEIM’S SACRED TOTEM

In his influential study The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Emile Durkheim aimed to discover the most foundational, or elementary, aspect of religion through his observations of indigenous peoples in Australia and North America.¹ His conclusion

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stated “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community.”

The sacred totem embodies the core of religious life because it delineates sacred from profane, provides rituals and beliefs, and unites the community. The totem is a symbol for both god and society, because, as Durkheim famously concluded, “the god of the clan … can be none other than the clan itself … transformed and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal that serves as totem.”

Although *Elementary Forms* has been very influential in religious studies, Durkheim was first and foremost a sociologist. As such, the underlying inquiry driving his study was understanding ‘organic and mechanical solidarity,’ or how society is created and what holds society together. This underlying question is of utmost importance in applying his theory. Without social norms and beliefs, the natural drives and tendencies of the individual would make collective, collaborative existence impossible when the group extends beyond the familial unit, a conundrum amplified when applied to a multicultural empire. For Durkheim, religion was a, if not the, key player in constructing the norms that make society possible, for “the idea of society is the soul of religion.”

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3 Ibid., 208.


5 Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 421.
The genesis of totemic religion and the totem itself arise organically over time; a society does not consciously choose its totem. It is at this point, conscious decision, where this analysis will depart slightly from Durkheim’s original theory. This departure, however, does not betray the principle of the theory but actually reinforces it. The emperors elevated a symbol that embodied their society’s values. Thus, imperial conversion was not the sanction of an outside religion with foreign values, but instead was the elevation of what society already viewed as sacred, albeit in a new form.

As such, the choice of symbol and manner of elevation required careful and calculated attention. The old symbols either faltered in creating unity or inspired the wrong kind of values, thus the symbols needed to be updated. Innovation, especially of symbols, has a narrow therapeutic range. If the new symbol varies too greatly, it runs the risk of being un-relatable, unintelligible, or irrelevant; if it varies too little, it fails to address the faltering unity. From the emperor’s perspective, the old symbols and religions were problematic not because they were ineffective or because they failed to inspire values; they were problematic because they were effective, but they were effective at inspiring values which did not align with the goals of the empire. Thus, the emperor needed to retain the sacred symbols, which did not value imperial goals, but reshape them so that they inspired different values. The success, or potential failure, of the imperial conversion required selecting a symbol that both represented what society already viewed as sacred and inspired imperially aligned values.

The Centrality of Dhamma

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Although the boundaries of the religions of India are subject to debate, the various religious traditions which originated there shared some underlying beliefs and concepts in common. Two key examples are karma and dharma. Karma, broadly defined, is the collection of both the good and bad actions of an individual, which in turn determines the fortune or misfortune of that individual. Dharma, or dhamma, encompasses many things across Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism and within each of the individual traditions. The concept of dhamma includes rites, rituals, duties, teachings, laws, and proper actions. Most importantly, at the core of dhamma is the idea of “universal law” in regards to ethical, religious, and social matters. Thus, dhamma provided a symbol that could cut across regional, cultural, and religious differences; the various groups that comprised Ashoka’s empire did not necessarily agree on the particular aspects of what constituted proper dhamma, but they did agree on the idea that following the right dhamma was of utmost importance.

For Ashoka, dhamma was the perfect symbol around which to unite his divided empire. Although Ashoka’s dhamma borrowed aspects from Buddhism, it was not strictly orthodox Buddhism, but rather something new altogether. Ashoka’s dhamma

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8 Ibid., 133-37; 177; 211-16.


was an articulation of the proper way of living for all of his subjects, both religiously and legally; it included specific commands/prohibitions and general principles, but clothed both in a spiritual aura. Resembling Buddhist teachings, his dhamma promoted compassion towards all living beings, which included a mandated tolerance of all religious sects. A practical and specific requirement of this principled compassion was a strict forbiddance of all forms of animal sacrifice.\(^{11}\) While forbidding animal sacrifice might seem like a natural manifestation of compassion, in reality, this prohibition served a specific purpose, and actually contradicted pure religious tolerance. Outlawing animal sacrifice effectively neutered the Vedic religion (the most popular form of Hinduism at the time), which centered on animal sacrifice.\(^{12}\)

Thus, Ashoka elevated a symbol, dhamma, which all of the peoples of his multi-religious, multi-cultural empire held sacred. Further, although his dhamma mandated *de jure* religious tolerance and inclusion, it simultaneously *de facto* forbade Vedic sacrificial religion, which posed the biggest threat to centralized power and imperial identity. Consequently, Ashoka created a symbol which both represented the sacred values of his society and also inspired the values aligned with his imperial goals.

**The Blessing of the Gods**

Roman society long held a deep conviction that the success of the empire depended upon the blessings of the gods, which were inferred by proper practice,

\(^{11}\) Bruce Rich, “To Uphold the World: What Two Statesmen from Ancient India can Tell Us about Our Current Crisis,” *Tikkun* vol. 26 is. 2 (Spring 2011): 11.

worship, and sacrifice. While this belief was a distinctive attribute of Roman society, the overall concept is by no means unique to Rome. Many societies throughout history have understood supernatural forces to be responsible for their triumphs and failures. Deities, though independently volitional, are often believed to be acting in response to human actions, whether it be moral, cultic, or otherwise.

Despite their military brutality and economic exploitation of the people they conquered, the Romans are often remembered positively for their religious policies, which generally allowed subjugated people to maintain their religious traditions. Roman religious policy is often viewed either as an early example of progressive religious toleration, a practical decision aimed at keeping subjugated people relatively content, or some combination thereof. While the policy certainly served practical purposes and allowed for multiple religions co-existing within one empire, the policy was not only political but also theological. Roman religious tolerance reflected Rome’s political goals as well as its religious beliefs.

Roman religion, though diverse across places and time periods, at its core was pantheistic; there was no exclusive single god or group of gods, but all gods were real.

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14 Ibid., 43.


As the empire expanded and encountered new religions and gods, these new gods could simply be folded into the larger pantheon, much like the people into the empire. Understood this way, Roman religious policy was not actually ‘pluralistic’ in the modern sense, nor even all that tolerant. As long as people paid tribute to and honored the Roman gods, and most importantly Caesar, worship of other gods posed no threat. This allowance, however, was not extended to all religions and at all times.

The extension and restriction of religious tolerance demonstrate the distinctive nature of Rome’s pantheistic religious views, as well as what they held most sacred. Generous religious policies almost always corresponded with times of peace or successful outwardly directed military campaigns. During unrest, civil war, or outside threat, religious policy became more puritanical, requiring (more) worship of Roman deities and the Emperor cult, and restricting or even banning certain religious sects and practices. The correlation demonstrates their sacred value: the gods blessed the empire or not in direct relation to the empire’s proper worship. Any time fortunes began to sour, it was only logical to revert back to worship practices as they were when the gods were blessing Rome.

Although on the surface Constantine’s conversion of the empire appeared like a radical change, in reality it primarily repackaged the old beliefs. The Constantinian conversion did not convert Roman pantheism to Christian monotheism, it simply incorporated the Christian god into the Roman pantheon. The difference is subtle, but

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17 Garnsey, *The Roman Empire*, 287-89.

very important and also paramount to its success. Constantine’s conversion did not abolish the existence of the old Roman gods, but instead stated that it was the Christian god who needed to be worshipped in order for imperial success.\textsuperscript{19} By doing so, Constantine appealed to Roman religious belief while simultaneously winning the support of the growing population of Christians within the empire.

The Pervasive Influence of Daoism

In contrast to the two previous contexts, Gao Zu promoted an indigenous religion to his empire. By the seventh-century CE, portions of Daoist sacred texts were nearly a millennium old.\textsuperscript{20} Daoism, especially as a philosophy, was deeply embedded in the fabric of imperial Chinese society. Alongside Confucius's writings and legalism, Daoism was as much a foundation of societal and philosophical thinking as it was a particular or distinctive philosophical school of thought or religion.\textsuperscript{21}

Although making comparisons to western parallels often causes unhelpful categorization - a form of academic colonialism - here a comparison is helpful for demonstrating the quantitative and qualitative influence of Daoism. Where the comparison falls short, and where it has been used poorly in the past, is in understanding the nature of or defining the category or kind of entity Daoism is, an important distinction

\textsuperscript{19} Timothy David Barnes, \textit{Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire} (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 83.

\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Tao Te Ching} was compiled ca. 300 BCE, with some parts dating back to the mid-fourth century BCE. See Russell Kirkland, “The History of Taoism: A New Outline.” \textit{Journal of Chinese Religions} 30, no. 1 (September 2002): 178-79.

to bear in mind. The pervasive influence of Daoism in China is analogous to Platonic philosophy in western culture.\textsuperscript{22} Further, Daoism’s relationship to Confucianism would be similar to Aristotle and Plato, in that the two are distinctive, have immense influence in unique and overlapping areas, but yet can and often do coexist within the same domain.\textsuperscript{23}

At this point the similarities largely end, especially in regards to 'classifying' Daoism by western definitions. As outlined in chapter two, Daoism as a religion emerged during the Han Dynasty, grew substantially over the next four centuries, but still remained mostly an unstructured, decentralized, highly localized religion. It was not until the Tang Dynasty that Daoism began to institutionalize.\textsuperscript{24}

Daoism, here used as broadly as possible, represented the perfect object for a sacred totem, both in the pure Durkheim-sense of the word as well as in the innovative symbolic-sense introduced in this chapter. The depth and breadth of its influence substantiates its importance to society: Daoism influenced religion, politics, philosophy, education, and art and was highly valued across regions and classes. Gao Zu's imperial patronage and elevation of Daoism was highly innovative in the purest sense of the word: it had never been done.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 39-41.

\textsuperscript{24} Kirkland, “The History of Taoism,” 180-82.

\textsuperscript{25} Liu, ed., \textit{Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy}, 483.
new symbol or establish a new religion per se, but instead simply elevated an already
highly valued symbol and institutionalized an existent religion.

MAX WEBER’S THEODICIES

Max Weber’s study of religion focused not as much on symbols and beliefs, but
instead on how religion affects the daily, practical, social, and economic actions of its
people. Cut short by an early death, Weber never finished his proposed massive work on
religion, but what he did finish was still remarkably impactful.26 According to Weber,
the key to understanding how religion shapes everyday life is to understand the forms of
suffering unique to each social stratum within a society.27

Weber noted that each social stratum within a society faces its own unique form
of suffering, to which religion seeks to respond by offering salvation both from that
suffering and for a particular goal. The primary way religion addresses this concern is
through the articulation of a theodicy, which explains both the reason for suffering and
for good fortune. Distinguishing theodicies of different stratum was important to Weber
because individuals from different stratum experienced different forms of suffering and
different levels of fortune.28 By explaining the cause of suffering and articulating the
forms and solutions of salvation, theodicy informed and shaped the social lives and
informed the everyday practical actions of individuals.

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27 Ibid., 153-65.

C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 267-68.
This section will focus on how the new religion addressed the suffering of a specific strata and offered salvation from that suffering, more specifically focusing on the lowest economic strata of each society. The narrowing to this specific stratum is intentional and significant. Its reflective of not only what the three emperors did, but also helps explain why they were effective. While the social strata of the few but powerful might seem like the ideal target for an emperor seeking to shore up power and support, loyalty from the masses actually proved itself more effective.

The Double Negative of a Misfortune Theodicy

Poorer classes within a society often adopt a theodicy of misfortune, which tend to attribute wealth and privilege to works of evil; the wealthier strata of society often adhere to a theodicy of fortune, which believes wealth to be a deserved and earned blessing.\(^29\) In contrast, in the Vedic system of religion, an individual’s caste was the reward or punishment for one’s past karma.\(^30\) In this system, generally speaking, both privileged and poor held to a theodicy of fortune.\(^31\) The appeal of a fortune theodicy to the rich is obvious as it justifies their position and helps to maintain the status quo, whereas a theodicy of misfortune often appeals to the poor because it promises some form of later reward for a person’s current suffering.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 164-65.


In the Vedic sacrificial system, popular at the time of Ashoka’s rise, the poor caste had the double negative of believing that their station in life was their due punishment, thus they lacked an ability to fully participate in the religious system which could give meaning to their suffering by promising a future reward. This conundrum provided Ashoka the perfect opportunity to gain the support of the common people of his empire. Through his dhamma, Ashoka thwarted the power and control of the Vedic sacrificial system and shifted the locus of religious participation to the Buddhist monastery.\textsuperscript{32}

The new Buddhist monastery reinforced Ashoka’s power not only because he established its leaders, but also because it encouraged religious participation of all members of society, no matter their means. Rather than having to offer animals for sacrifice, something far too costly for the already economically vulnerable, the poor agrarian masses could offer their excess crops in exchange for religious reward.\textsuperscript{33} Though a sacrifice of any nature would be costly, this new system worked because it gave the masses a feasible goal, thus encouraging productivity as well as giving them meaning and significance for their work.

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\textsuperscript{32} Jean Elliot Johnson, “A Vow to Conquer by Dhamma,” \textit{Calliope} vol. 10 is. 5 (January 2000): 14.

Similar to the Maurya Empire, the common religion of the Roman Empire largely embraced a theodicy of fortune. Although Roman religion encouraged the participation of the masses, the reward for sacrifice was largely corporate, with little hope of advancing one’s station in a future life and no hope of advancing in the present life.\textsuperscript{34}

Here, the ascetic nature of Christianity offered Constantine a great opportunity.

As it existed at the time, Christianity predominantly held a strong theodicy of misfortune. With its harsh critiques of material wealth and praise of the poor, Christianity allowed Constantine to offer spiritual and future rewards as well as significance for the present sufferings for the masses. Although this section is focused on the lower strata of society, it is worth noting the double benefit of the specific model of Christianity promoted by Constantine. While Christianity had strong economic ethical maxims, the institutionalized church offered spiritual and future rewards without necessarily demanding or bringing about systematic structural change to society. Thus, Constantine could gain support without renouncing power or having to address the structural inequality.

A Theodicy of Acceptance?

Daoism is difficult to characterize along fortune/misfortune theodicy delineations. In specific manifestations, Daoism and Confucianism exhibited characteristics of each, without perfectly matching the categories themselves. Institutionalized political Confucianism partially resembled a theodicy of fortune, because of its high value of duty and respect, it fostered status quo maintenance, but without necessarily equating wealth

\textsuperscript{34} Nigosian, \textit{World Religions}, 71-75.
as blessing for good or a sign of evil. Many manifestations of Daoism had an ascetic nature, which resembled the lifestyle of a theodicy of misfortune without fully aligning with that philosophy. Daoism as it developed after the fall of the Han Dynasty, however, developed a strong apocalyptic flavor, which is a specific form of religious nature which does not fit well within either theodicies of fortune or misfortune.

At the core of Daoist thought, both philosophically and religiously, is an acceptance of the way things are, which, although it sounds fatalistic, is more of a mood of contented acceptance than a fatalistic resignation. This mood is pervasive throughout the Tao Te Ching, but is explicitly stated as “Have faith in the way things are.” In this way, Daoism differed from the two other religions by how it addressed suffering and salvation. The difference lies at the core philosophical assumptions of each: at the heart of most religious traditions there is a belief that the way things are and the way things ought to be are not in alignment, so religion seeks to explain this disparity, whereas Daoism lacks this discrepancy altogether. Instead of ‘are’ and ‘ought,’ in Daoism there is just ‘is.’ Thus, rather than giving significance to present suffering by offering a future reward, through Daoism, Gao Zu offered an acceptance of the way things are.

CONCLUSION


Ashoka, Constantine, and Gao Zu used religion to unite their empires because of religion’s symbolic value and its response to the masses’ suffering. The genius of their conversions was that their conversions both resonated with the sacred values of society and addressed the suffering of the poorest stratum. Each emperor accomplished this task in a slightly different manner: Ashoka promoted a concept valued across religious traditions, dhamma, while also addressing the lowest caste’s suffering. Constantine adopted the Christian god into the Roman pantheon, while also introducing a highly ascetic religious system. Gao Zu simply made the value system, which was already highly regarded and encouraged content acceptance of the world, into the official religion of the state. As a result, the people not only tolerated imperial rule, but also viewed this rule positively because the empire affirmed what they held as most sacred and offered them salvation from the suffering that they experienced. In return, the emperors gained what they desired as well: loyalty and devotion, all without having to make any systematic change.
CHAPTER FOUR
STRUCTURAL POWER

The previous chapter explored insights gained about imperial conversions through the lens of two modern thinkers. This chapter considers those same imperial conversions through the lens of a post-modern scholar of religion, Talal Asad. Religious studies proper as an academic field arrived soon after the time of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, both of whom, though not ‘religious studies scholars,’ deeply influenced the field.\(^1\) In the middle-to-late twentieth century, religious studies took a significant turn, largely fueled by definitional debates around the term ‘religion’ itself. Previous research on religion generally came from Western Christian contexts, which deeply influenced how religion was defined and understood.\(^2\) New voices emerged, critiquing this research and arguing the term ‘religion’ was in truth descriptive of Christianity and was superimposed on other religious traditions, whether or not the description fit. Talal Asad critiqued scholarly understandings of religion as too Western and Christian in their biases. Much of Asad’s work built upon Clifford Geertz, who was himself deeply influenced by Durkheim. Asad critiqued Geertz for missing the importance of context

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\(^2\) Ibid.
and power in the formation and function of religion as well as being too biased toward Christianity in his interpretation.³

Using Asad’s critiques as a framework, this chapter will explore the roles of power and context in the imperial conversions, more specifically how the cultural realities and the (shifting) locus of religious authority made the imperial conversions possible. The first aspect, largely symbolic, was the creation of a religiously infused mythology of the emperor, which gave him a salvific-like status and bestowed him with religious authority. The second, largely structural, was the promotion of religious leaders into political positions, which gave them political authority. These two moves, though separate and distinct, should not be understood as unrelated. These moves were a form of mutual exchange between religious and political authorities, each offering shares of their respective power. Underlying the whole process are the actions of the emperors as they existed in and related to their cultural context. In each example, the myth of the emperors borrowed from, co-opted, tweaked, and played into the structures, institutions, and norms of the culture in which they were birthed.

ASHOKA: A NEW KIND OF KING, A NEW KIND OF STATE

The story of Ashoka’s dramatic conversion to Buddhism is one of the most well-known facets of his life. While the historicity of the story is questionable, what makes the story so important is merely the fact that it was so pervasive and popular. The conversion story set the foundation for Ashoka’s dhamma, foreign relations, religious

policies, and economic initiatives. After the bloody wars of conquest, the conquering-warlord-Ashoka needed to undergo a symbolic, or mythological, conversion before the eyes of his empire in order to become the ideal-Buddhist-king-Ashoka.

According to the legend, after winning the final battle in his quest to conquer the Kalinga Kingdom, Ashoka walked the grounds of his newly acquired land and felt remorse rather than satisfaction. Overwhelmed by sorrow and regret at the death and devastation he caused, Ashoka renounced violence and adopted Buddhism. Because the only sources about Ashoka’s life are his stone edicts and rather legendary stories from Buddhist texts, primarily the Ashokavadana, much of the historicity is contested and/or unknown. A few key aspects of Ashoka’s life and reign are well attested historically. Ashoka did in fact begin his reign with fierce warfare and conquering, which culminated in his conquest of Kalinga. Further, outside evidence and archaeological dating affirms that his stone pillars were erected after his conquests. Likewise, the policies detailed in his edicts, as well as his commissioning of Buddhist missionaries, both of which marked a radical shift in imperial policy, were enacted after his conquest. Thus, it is clear that after his reign of violence, Ashoka’s rule did radically change, as he adopted a more compassionate rule which had echoes of Buddhist principles.

Regardless of whether the actions were religiously motivated or not, Ashoka’s imperial rule underwent a substantial conversion. With this in mind, the conversion

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5 Ibid.
stories and legends provided a necessary explanation of the radical shift in policy, which otherwise would seem illogical or irrational. In order for the external actions of an individual to change in a qualitative way, it logically follows that the individual’s internal character substantially changed. A religious change, or conversion, has the double benefit of explaining the internal change in character as well as giving the external actions an aura of religious significance and authority. The accounts of Ashoka’s conversion explained why he enacted new political polices while at the same time giving the policies divine sanction.

The Indian subcontinent is considered one of the cradles of civilization, and the Vedic period, roughly 1750–600 BCE, brought about significant technological, cultural, and religious developments, including the composition of the Vedas. While the eras preceding the Maurya Empire definitively shaped its culture, there was not yet a single, all-encompassing Indian empire, but rather various smaller kingdoms and ‘republics.’ Chandragupta founded the first large empire on the subcontinent, which reached its peak under his grandson Ashoka. Although the region had a rich and expansive pool of cultural mythology, Ashoka ruled an empire lacking a single, all-encompassing imperial mythology, or that possessed at best a nascent one.

Ashoka’s vow to “conquer by dhamma” functioned as the first empire-wide foundational mythology and was articulated in his edicts. The emperor’s conversion

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7 Jean Elliot Johnson, “A Vow to Conquer by Dhamma,” *Calliope* vol. 10 is. 5 (January 2000): 15.
story served as a model of what defined the empire and its mythology. One of the more important aspects of this new myth was the portrayal of Asoka as the ‘ideal Buddhist king.’ The identity of the empire by necessity included, and even required, a king. Furthermore, this king not only possessed the naturally assumed political power, but his title also bestowed on him a level of religious authority as the one responsible for giving and enforcing the prescribed dhamma for the whole empire. Thus, Ashoka secured for himself the ability to shape religious beliefs and practices, which could in turn serve his political goals.

Ashoka’s conversion was not just symbolically successful; structural measures also enabled the conversion’s success. As previously described, Ashoka’s personal conversion and subsequent religious policies had a lasting impact on Buddhism by institutionalizing and spreading the religion, both of which were achieved via his political actions: building Buddhist monasteries, convening the third Buddhist council, and commissioning and sending Buddhist missionaries to neighboring regions around India.\(^8\) These practical actions promoted the social reinforcement of the broader symbolic narrative.

The Buddhist monasteries constructed across the empire functioned as localized extensions of imperial power not only because of Ashoka’s patronage, but also because they answered directly to Ashoka as informants and magistrates.\(^9\) The individuals who were creating, spreading, and administering the myths, stories, and rituals were able to do

\(^8\) SarDesai, *India*, 70.

so because of the structural political power given to them by the emperor. The symbols affirmed the legitimacy of the structures, and the structures gave the symbols the preferential position in order to be able to do so. Thus, the Ashokan Buddhist conversion of the Maurya Empire succeeded, as political power and religious authority symbiotically affirmed each other, constructing the religious truth of the myths of empire and emperor.

CONSTANTINE: THE SECOND *CHRISTOS*

While the story of Constantine’s divine vision at the Milvian Bridge is one of the better-known events in his life,\(^{10}\) his conversion is only one part of his religiously symbolic role. Similar to Ashoka’s conversion, Constantine’s shift in religious and political policy needed an explanation, or, more precisely, a justification. As articulated in previous chapters, converting the Roman Empire to Christianity presented numerous political benefits for the up-and-coming emperor, but a pagan emperor could not justify converting a pagan empire based on political motivations alone; his actions needed divine explanation as well as divine sanction. Constantine’s personal conversion story provided the necessary explanation for his initial political actions, but that story alone did not define his complete role. To enact his policies fully and successfully, Constantine needed to be both a *Christian* and a Christian *emperor*.

Although venerated as a saint ‘equal to the apostles’ in the Orthodox Church, Constantine’s original sarcophagus design signals that he symbolically viewed his role

\(^{10}\) Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 93.
differently. By his own designation, and as recorded by Eusebius, Constantine considered himself to be the ‘thirteenth apostle.’ The symbolic structure of his tomb at the Church of the Holy Apostles, which he constructed, is often cited as evidence of this fact. Constantine’s original goal, though never fully realized, was to have relics of the original twelve apostles buried there alongside him. The original design, which was later changed, featured Constantine not among but in the center of the twelve, signaling his position as a *christos*, or Messiah.

In its first few centuries, Christianity, which grew out of Judaism under the shadow of the Roman Empire, did not possess an image of an earthly, human king. On the other hand, Roman religion, as it had developed by the time of Constantine, featured the political role of emperor as an integral part of its belief system, to the point of deifying the position. Constantine had to synthesize his Roman political authority, which cast him as divine, with his new religion Christianity, which was not only monotheistic but also had a substantially different understanding of ‘kings’ and ‘kingdoms.’ Casting himself as a messiah figure, he attempted to reconcile his position and new religion, albeit by altering both in the process.

Achieving a symbolic ‘baptism’ of his role, title, and public image required more from Constantine than shifting the narrative; structural changes were also necessary. The religious conversion of the Roman Empire was, in many regards, a two-way conversion:

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12 Ibid.
the Roman Empire was Christianized and Christianity was Romanized. Although there were a number of policy and structural actions used to accomplish this goal, the changing role of the bishop provides one of the best examples of the implementation of the conversion.

Church bishops were not only symbolically elevated to a higher position, but they were also given the political authority and power to substantiate their new role. Bishops, who already possessed ecclesial power and influence, gained political privileges so much so that their political power eventually eclipsed their religious and, soon after Constantine’s death, church leaders were as powerful as political leaders.13 Understandably, this allowed Christian ideas to directly shape and influence ‘secular’ matters. Influence, however, was a two-way street; the power which allowed Christianity to shape the empire did not immunize it from being changed by that power.

Asad argues that religious symbols and beliefs are shaped by the contextual realities of power in which they are formed;14 thus the newly afforded political power of the church resulted in a shift of its beliefs and practices. Doctrines, texts, structures, and rituals which represented marginalized, and even at times anti-imperial, viewpoints came to signify something different, even when their outward manifestations remained unchanged. Rather than attempting to stamp out a religion that did not buy into the imperial system, Constantine, rather wisely, gave that religion imperial power. The

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14 Asad, Genealogies, 54.
religion, then, would no longer have reason to oppose the empire, because by doing so it would be opposing itself.

Although this power transaction might sound almost like a bribe, in actuality the process was more subtle because of the simultaneous implementation of the various actions, which was also its key to success. Constantine’s personal conversion, his conversion of the empire, and his policy changes all necessitated, coordinated, and corroborated each other. In order to make Christian bishops into Roman political figures who would be loyal to the empire, the empire needed to be Christian, and a Christian empire required a Christian emperor. Furthermore, to make Christianity compatible with imperial power, its symbols needed to be embedded in such a contextual way that they could signify different meanings, which is what politicizing bishops accomplished.

**GAO ZU: DIVINE LINEAGE INVENTED**

The cultural context of pre-Tang China included diverse religious views on the role of political power. Although the different religious traditions were not always clearly distinguishable from one another in practice, there were beliefs associated with certain traditions that had distinctive perspectives. Confucianism’s pervasive influence on politics tended to support traditional, hierarchical, ancestral rule.\(^{15}\) Buddhism, as it manifested in China at the time, represented an ambivalent view of political power at best, and at worst was seen as a threat because of its perceived foreignness.\(^{16}\) A

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\(^{15}\) Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 210.

particularly strong strand of Daoism carried an apocalyptic, almost messianic, flavor that
longed for the restoration of a Han-like Dynasty and the mandate of heaven.\(^\text{17}\) Despite
these disparate views, Gao Zu claiming divine lineage managed to incorporate and
synthesize these otherwise competing beliefs.

Gao Zu’s claim to be the descendant of Laozi was an ‘invention’ in two senses: it
invented the lineage and thus made it meaningful. Gao Zu, who almost certainly was not
actually descended from Lao, made this ancestral lineage significant. Through this
invention, Laozi cast himself as the ideal image of being truly and distinctively
‘Chinese.’\(^\text{18}\) The importance of this portrayal was that it gave Gao Zu a symbol that
could both transcend and unite religious differences. Gao could promote Daoism without
completely isolating either Confucianism or Buddhism because Laozi, as the ultimate
human symbol of Daoism, was first and foremost Chinese. Thus, Daoism did not
symbolize the negation of other religions, but the promotion of Chinese values.

Gao Zu supported his positive image by making the other religious traditions
‘official religions’ of the empire. Furthermore, this inclusiveness bolstered Gao’s claim
to be the rightful emperor because he could be viewed positively for symbolically
affirming other religious allegations. The apparent religious inclusion, however, was not
complete religious acceptance or tolerance. The designation of ‘official’ religions, by
definition, creates ‘unofficial’ as a designation for some religions as well. Rather than


creating complete religious tolerance, Gao’s inclusion of several religions had a double effect which boosted the emperor’s ability to use and control religion. The official religions, though formally accepted and promoted, were influenced by their proximity and subordination to the empire. On the other hand, Gao could ostracize any religions that might undermine or oppose imperial rule. In contrast to their official counterparts, unofficial religions would carry the stigma of not only being appositional to the empire but also being appositional to the officially designated religions.

Like the two previous historical contexts, Gao Zu’s symbolic conversion required structural changes in order to be successful. Gao pushed out religion which he viewed as dissenting by gathering the ‘noble’ religions together around him, both metaphorically and literally. Designation as ‘official’ gave a religion imperial sanction to practice, a designated area in the capital, and, more importantly, a mandatory position at the emperor’s court.\(^\text{19}\) By his design, Gao made his court the epicenter of politics, religion, and culture by assembling around him the greatest poets, writers, religious leaders, and bureaucrats of the day.\(^\text{20}\) This precedent, which helped make Xian the hotbed of China’s cultural golden age, was the necessary component that made Gao’s religious policy and religious image function. The abundance of original religious texts written there demonstrate that the emperor could influence religion both directly and indirectly throughout his empire. Further, the prestige of being at the emperor’s court helped the

\(^{19}\) Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 200.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
CONCLUSION

The success of three imperial conversions hinged upon each emperor using their power to (1) influence the content of the religious message, (2) place religious leaders in positions to promote and reinforce that message, (3) strategically tailor the message to dialogically relate to the cultural norms of their context, and (4) affect institutions and structures so that the message could be interpreted in the desired manner. On the surface, the tangible actions might be interpreted as a kind of negotiated agreement wherein religious and political figures mutually exchanged authority and power; this interpretation, however, overlooks the importance of the social context of the religious leaders, political authorities, and religious adherents. Furthermore, the ‘negotiation’ interpretation assumes a sequential timeline, when in fact the various aspects happened more or less simultaneously. This reality is best illustrated by how the various actions related to one another: each aspect logically necessitated the others, meaning that they were not strictly disparate parts reciprocating one another but instead were different parts of the same whole, being incomplete and impossible without one another. Thus, while the various aspects of the conversion can be separately understood in hindsight, at the time they were so interrelated that they would have been indistinguishable.

The emperors made changes to the realities they controlled – societal structures, legal matters, and political institutions – to allow religion to affirm their position and power. In this sense, conversion was not a direct construction of a narrative by the
emperor. Instead, the emperor repositioned the structures within society, which resulted in the ambassadors of and adherents to specific religions changing the content and interpretation of the symbolic to reflect their new reality. To put it succinctly, the emperor altered the structure of the empire, the people responded to the changes by converting the empire.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Three questions were posed in the introduction: why do empires undergo conversion, how do they undergo conversion, and what insights does this teach about the formation of religion? Chapter two answered the first question by demonstrating that religious conversions were a response to social and political crises. Chapters three and four answered the second question by showing how the new religious policies appealed to existing cultural values (chapter three) and how the emperors used their structural power to enact symbolic change (chapter four). This final chapter will address the third question by synthesizing the insights from the three previous chapters.

Scholarly debates about defining religion have demonstrated how simplistic definitions are problematic. Simple definitions create narrow boundaries which in turn often exclude certain aspects of particular religions, if not entire religions. The examination of imperial conversion presents three insights into the study of religion that challenge simple conventional definitions; they are centered around the themes of motivation and cause, time and history, and political/religious distinctions. These insights are not meant to be a new comprehensive definition of religion, but rather can enhance and deepen current definitions.

WHY CONVERT? UNPACKING MOTIVATION AND CAUSE

Asking “why do empires convert?” presupposes two points: first, that motivations existed which caused the conversion, and, second, that these motivations can be
determined. The attempt to determine motivation assumes that the conversions were not purely arbitrary, which is a reasonably defensible position. Further, some critics might argue that definitively determining causes and motivations is impossible. While I concede that cause and motivation cannot be conclusively established, causes can be judiciously deduced by understanding the context, which can lead to reasonable hypotheses about motivations.

Any study of this nature must focus on specific historical details, thereby excluding others. As much as possible, this study included all of the most relevant information throughout, even when the information might not fit the proposed conclusion. As such, the historical evidence points to the fact that the emperors were motivated by a desire to remedy the crises of their empires. The long-lasting changes to Buddhism, Christianity, and Daoism were tangential, unforeseen, or unintended.

Further, the long-term effects of the imperial conversions vary significantly in regards to securing imperial unity and affecting religious devotion and influence. Gao Zu inaugurated the three-century dynasty of China’s Golden Age, whereas the Maurya empire effectively collapsed immediately after Ashoka’s reign and the Roman Empire likewise split and fell soon after Constantine’s death. All three emperors left an undeniable mark on their respective religions, but the historical trajectory of each religion differed greatly: (1) Buddhism never again even came close to its status in India under Ashoka, but Ashoka’s commissioned missionaries introduced Buddhism to other parts of southeast Asia where it is dominant to this day; (2) Constantine’s actions affectively inaugurated Christendom, the church, and Christianity’s hegemony over Europe; and (3)
the Tang Dynasty was the golden age of Daoism in China; although it would remain a vital part of China’s religious landscape, Daoism’s privileged position waned soon thereafter never fully recovering.

The dissonance between motivations, immediate effects, and long-term results challenges a common assumption in the historical study of religion. Although not always explicitly stated as such, histories of religion often link long-term results with the motivations of key figures at pivotal moments. This underlying assumption can be seen in a popular statement taken from church history: it was not Martin Luther’s original intent to split from the Catholic Church. The need to clarify that the key figure did not intend the long-term result demonstrates the existence of this underlying and unstated assumption. As a result, the history of a religion’s development is portrayed as having been intentionally willed. By contrast, the three imperial conversions show how major developments can arise unintentionally from entirely different motivations.

WHEN DOES CHANGE OCCUR? TIME AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The historical study of religion is often an examination of religious change/evolution, wherein key moments constitute the foci. Imperial conversions generally occur at watershed moments in history, thus making them an appealing subject. The Protestant Reformation, for example, attracts the full attention of many scholars, and is almost always included in any historical survey of Christianity. Religious historical narrative tends to follow a fixed structure as a result: a description of a seminal event that alters the religion and its trajectory, reactions and responses to the seminal change, a survey of the era that follows, an account of the factors that will lead to the next
watershed moment, and the next seminal event. The pervasive influence of this narrative structure is still latent in many contemporary texts. Examples from three different books, each on a different religion, demonstrate this point; even though each text uses its own unique structure, the archetype is visible across their differences.¹

Although the texts that follow this model are not inherently inaccurate, the system sends a message about the nature of religious change, albeit not explicitly so. This structure implies that religion is mostly static with the exception of pivotal moments, wherein change is volitionally caused. The ultimate reason for these assumptions, I argue, is due to the intense focus on the ‘moment,’ for example the Edict of Milan. This study has demonstrated that the impact of the ‘moments,’ though certainly important, need to be analyzed in conjunction with their respective contexts to be understood best.

The assertion that “the Edict of Milan represented a watershed moment in Christianity’s development” is accurate only if the emphasis is placed on represented. As explained in chapter two, there was not an edict issued from Milan granting Christianity legal status, but Constantine did in fact make this a reality during his rise to power nonetheless. Thus, the Edict of Milan was not a monumental decision that shifted the trajectory of Christianity’s development; ‘the Edict of Milan,’ understood as a symbol of the shift in policies and attitudes toward Christianity, does symbolize the changes in religious policy during Constantine’s reign.

Additionally, an overemphasis on a particular moment can easily lead to the conclusion that change is volitional. Both proximate and ultimate results do not always

¹ See Appendix A for analysis of the similarities
coincide with the original intent of their actions. Some of the immediate effects were often intended, but other actions caused unintended results, some of which were even in direct opposition to their original intent. For example, one of the most significant long-term results of Asoka’s religious policy was the successful spread of Buddhism outside of India, but Buddhism’s influence in India and Ashoka’s dynasty fell rapidly after his death. For another example, Constantine bestowed immense political power on Christian bishops in order to leverage their positioning to shore up his authority; ironically, soon thereafter, the political authority of the church enabled it to fill the growing power-vacuum caused by the Roman Empire’s decline.

A HOLY WALL? POLITICS AND RELIGION

The Enlightenment’s reductionist tendency constructed impermeable walls between academic disciplines; valuing expertise and assuming epistemological positivism, disciplinary study created independent silos of knowledge and methodology. Once the walls were built, the topic and research methods of any given field were fixed, including religious studies. As a result, disciplines such as politics and economics slowly began to be considered beyond the scope of religion. Although religious studies and the strict separation of disciplines have since evolved, the residual effects are still visible to this day.

Religion and politics experienced this divorce even more acutely. The intention of separating of church and state was to foster religious liberty and to prevent religion from influencing politics. This prescriptive value seeped into the descriptive understanding of religion by mistaking a philosophical value for ontological truth.
Recent history and the evolution of scholarship have dismantled this assumption, demonstrating that removing religion from politics in no way makes religion apolitical.

For the sake of clarity this paper used the labels ‘political/imperial’ and ‘religious’ throughout as a means of contrasting distinct motivations and actions. This study demonstrated how this demarcation was often vague, if not entirely ambiguous or even non-existent. For example, it is inaccurate to separate the religious from the political in Ashoka’s dhamma. His ban on animal sacrifice provided him an important political benefit, but it also reflected his new quasi-Buddhist religious attitude of non-violence.

Blurring the boundary lines of religion does not abolish conventional descriptors, for example ‘religious’ and ‘political.’ Rather, dissecting the intersection of religion and politics can provide original insights about the nature of each, while simultaneously problematizing definitions that consider them fundamentally unrelated. It would be inaccurate to claim that every religious action has political motivations, or vice versa; the point, instead, is that religious and political values often have a reciprocating influence on one another.

CONCLUSION

These considerations are no panacea for correcting all the shortcomings in the study of religion, but they do provide pathways into enriching and deepening understanding. Studying the relationship between religion and politics, which has recently gained more interest, holds great potential for new insights about religion. This relationship, however, represents only one of religion’s intersections with the human experience. A close examination of other intersections, such as philosophy, art, and
sociology, can further deepen the study of religion. Although these such intersections represent a growing field within religious studies, there are many others that have not yet, or have just begun, to be explored.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

The following three examples represent three different religious traditions and three different stated purposes and foci. Their general adherence to the archetypal pattern, however, is not meant to discredit their legitimacy. Rather, the fact that all three books represent high quality scholarship, yet also all adhere to the pattern, demonstrates how influential and pervasive the pattern is. Below, for each text the chapter or section titles are provided.

For convenience, I have included an abbreviated version of the structure. The shortened terms will be used in the individual analyses; the matching superscripts correspond to the chronology of the occurrences, i.e. Results\(^1\) is both the first description of the results era and the results from the first seminal event; Results\(^2\) is the second and follows from the second seminal event, etc.:

Seminal Event\(^1\) > Results\(^1\) > Era\(^1\) > Build Up\(^1\) > Seminal Event\(^2\) > Results\(^2\) > …

**The Buddhist Handbook**

Introduction: Part 1: Prologue

**Seminal Event\(^1\):** Part 2: The Buddha

**Results\(^1\):** Part 3: The Basic Teachings and Practices

**Era\(^1\):** Part 4: The Development of Buddhism in India

**Build Up\(^1\):** Part 5: The Spread of Buddhism

**Seminal Event\(^2\):** Part 6: Buddhism Comes West

**Daoism: An Introduction**

Introduction: I: Telling the Story of Daoism

**Seminal Event\(^1\):** II: The Sprouting of the Trunk of Daoism

**Results\(^1\):** III: The Composite Trunk of Daoism

**Era\(^1\):** IV: The Masters Who Nurtured the Trunk of Daoism

V: Growth of the Daoist Vine During the Qin and Han Dynasties
VI: The Earliest Branches of Daoism

Build Up¹:
VII: The Spread of Celestial Masters’ Daoism
VIII: New Vines and the Masters Who Began Them

Seminal Event²:
IX: Daoism in the Tang: Robust Maturity of the Vine

Results²:
X: Scrambling and Overlapping Vines and Stems of Daoism in the Song and Yuan

Era²:
XI: Daoism Overgrows Chinese Culture: The Ming and Qing Dynasties
XII: Spreading the Daoist Vine at Home and Abroad

The Story of Christianity
Introduction:
1: The Early Church
2: The Fullness of Time

Era¹:
3: The Church in Jerusalem
4: Mission to the Gentiles

Build Up¹:
5: First Conflicts with the State

Seminal Event²:
6: Persecution in the Second Century

Results²:
7: The Defense of the Faith

Era²:
8: The Deposit of the Faith
9: The Teachers of the Church

Seminal Event³:
10: Persecution in the Third Century

Era³:
11: Christian Life

Build Up³:
12: The Great Persecution and the Final Victory

Seminal Event⁴:
13: Constantine

Results⁴:
14: Official Theology: Eusebius of Caesarea

Era⁴:
15: The Monastic Reaction

Build Up⁴:
16: The Schismatic Reaction: Donatism
Seminal Event⁵: 17: The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea

Results⁵: 18: The Pagan Reaction: Julian the Apostate

Era⁵: 19: Athanasius of Alexandria
20: The Great Cappadocians
21: Ambrose of Milan
22: John Chrysostom
23: Jerome
24: Augustine of Hippo

Build Up⁵: 25: Beyond the Borders of the Empire
26: The End of an Era

Seminal Event⁶: 27: The New Order

Era⁶: 28: Eastern Christianity
29: Imperial Restoration and Continuing Decay

Build Up⁶: 30: Movements of Renewal
31: The Offensive Against Islam

Seminal Event⁷: 32: The Golden Age of Medieval Christianity

Results⁷: 33: The Collapse

Build Up⁷: 34: In Quest of Reformation
35: Renaissance and Humanism

Era⁷: 36: Spain and the New World
37: The Portuguese Enterprise

