

Silk Roads: Paths for the Faithful

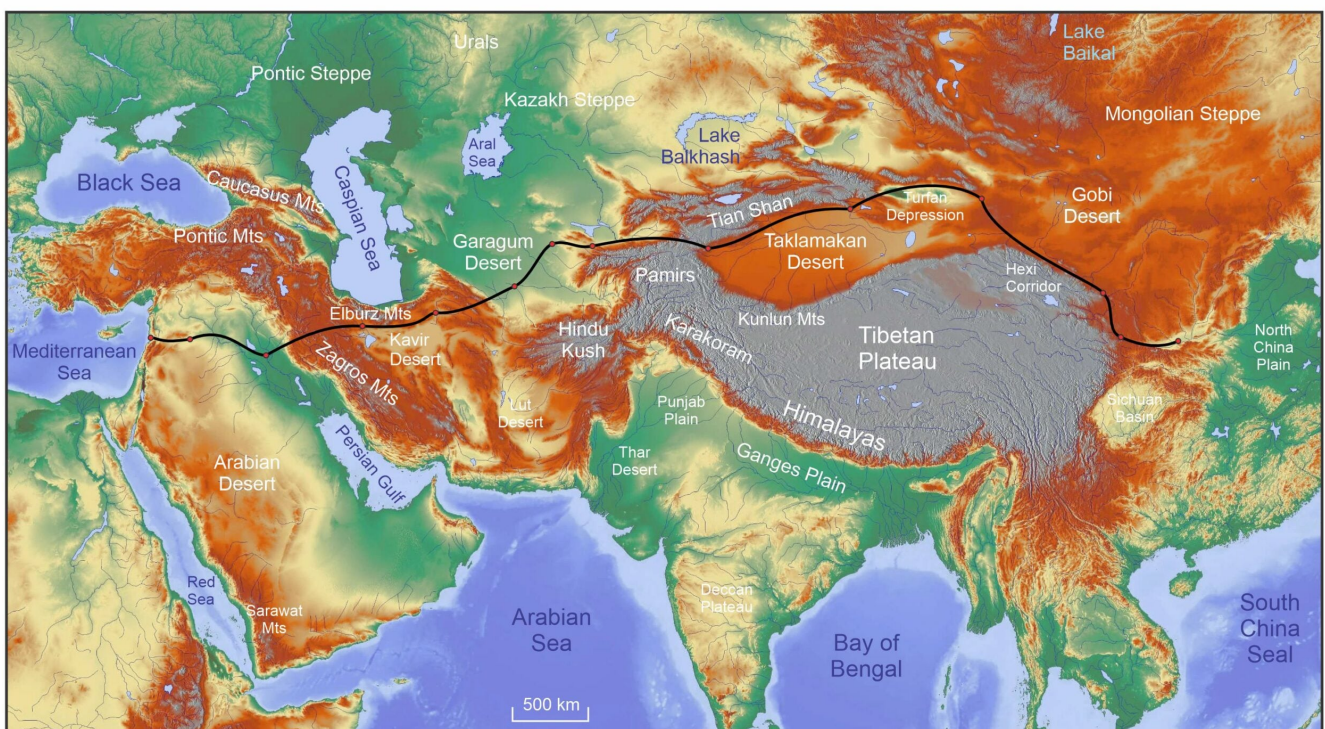
The Silk Roads were overland routes connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea, which allowed the trading of silk, paper, gold, jewels, horses, and other goods. These began during the 2nd Century BCE at the time of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Dynasty in the East. The Silk Roads remained active until the 15th Century CE, when they were largely replaced by maritime trading routes. At present they are mainly used for archeological research and tourism. The illustration shows a modern camel caravan in the desert near Dunhuang. As well as trade goods, the Silk Roads facilitated the movement of religious ideas. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam followed the Silk Roads into China. Mithraism, Manichaeism and Islam spread into Europe.

Central Asia

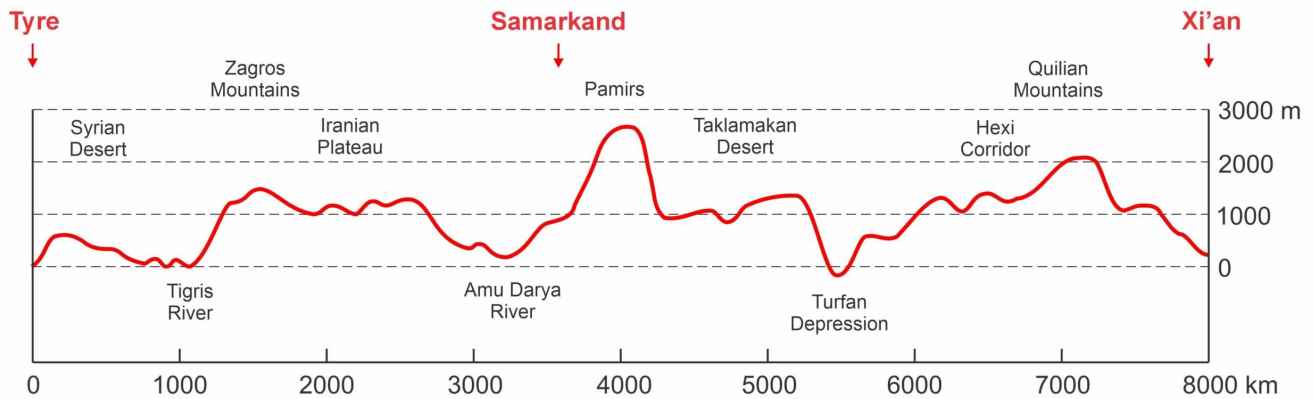
A map of the present political boundaries in central Asia will allow us to get our bearings:



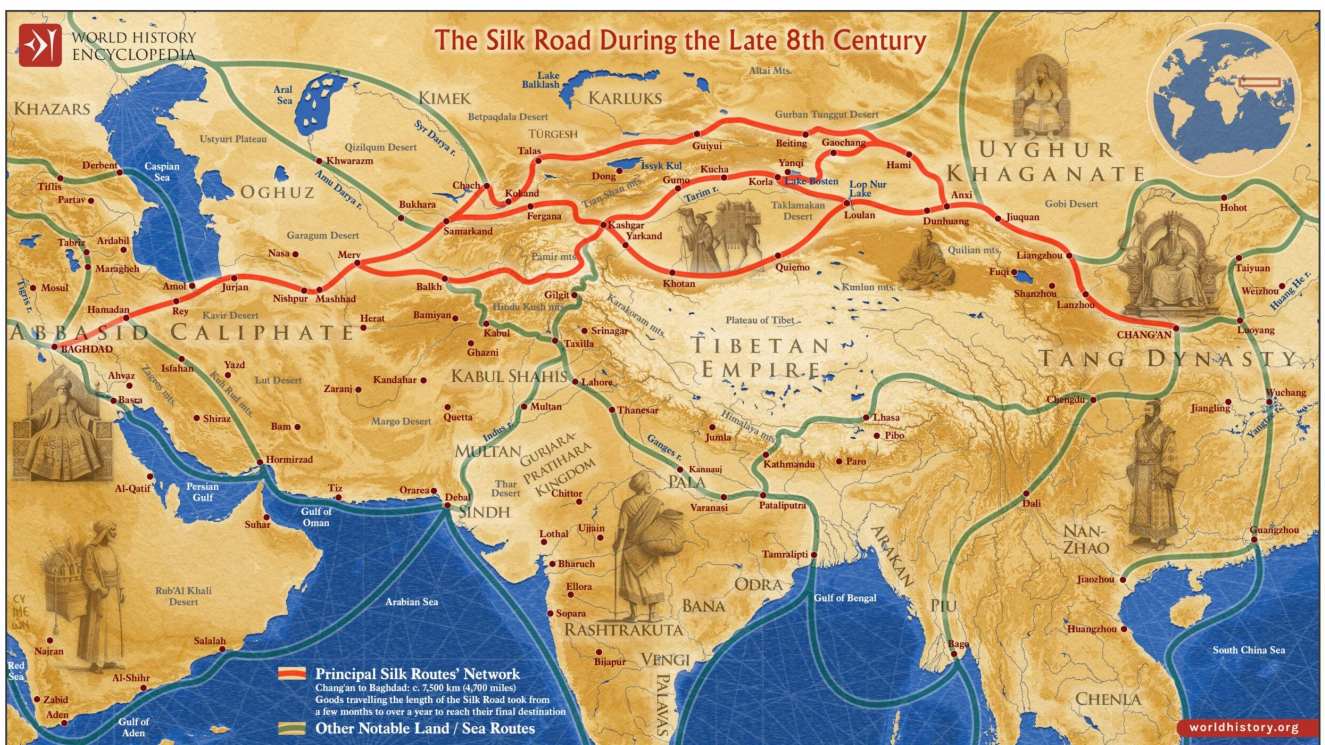
The following map shows the topography of the region and traces one of the many possible Silk Roads from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Tyre on the Mediterranean.



The following diagram, modified from Wood (2002), shows the changes in altitude (in meters above sea level) over the journey. It also notes the main mountains that are traversed, the deserts that are crossed and the main rivers on the way.



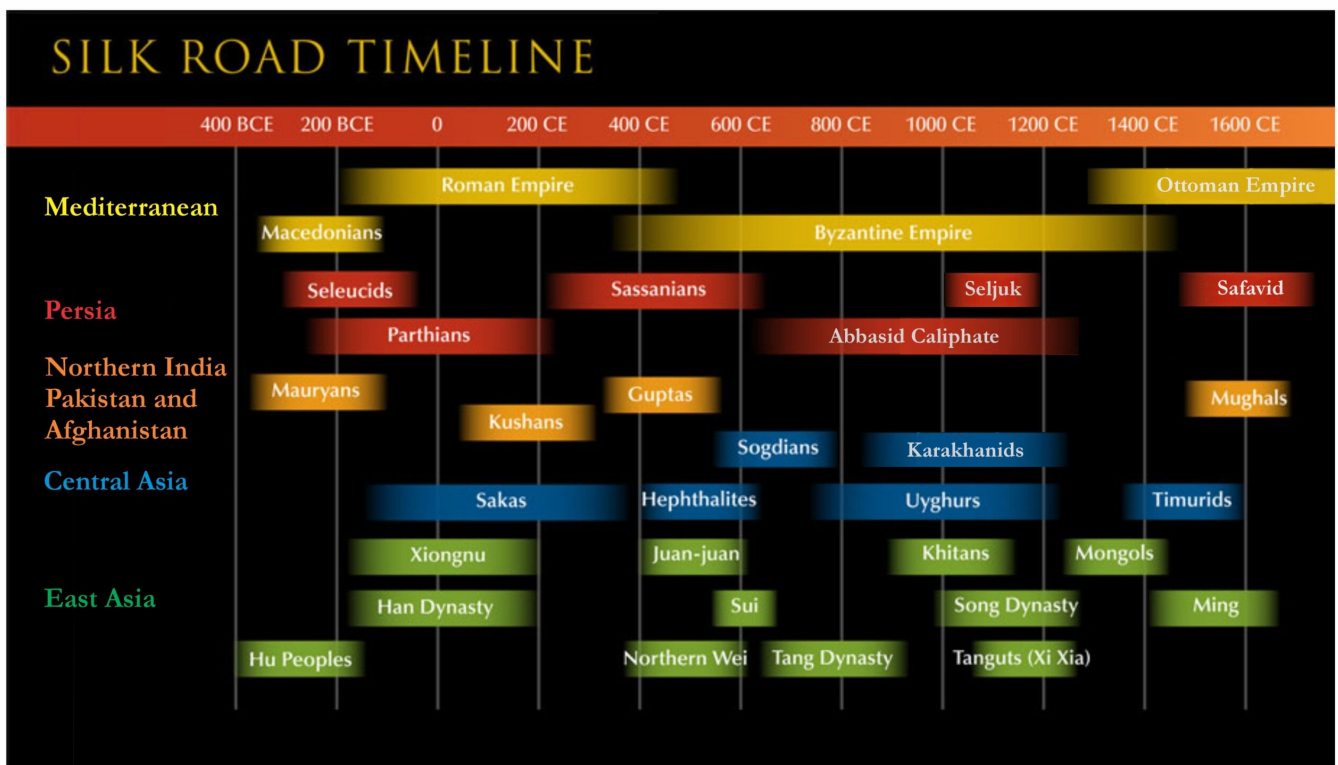
The Silk Roads spanned some 8000 km and were active for about 1700 years. They are described in multiple recent books (Frankopan, 2016; Hansen, 2017; Millward, 2013, Torr, 2018, Whitfield, 2024; Wood 2002). A striking TV series from Japan can be downloaded from archive.org. The following two maps by Simeon Natchev show the Silk Roads at two different points in time: the first map when trade began between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty in the 1st Century BCE, and the second map when the Silk Roads were at their height during the late 8th Century CE with the Tang Dynasty in China and the Abbasid Caliphate in the West. The first map also shows the maritime routes connecting China, India and Europe, and the monsoon winds that facilitate them. These sea connections are sometimes considered the “Golden Road” (Dalrymple, 2025, pp 4-5).



The Mongol Empires (1206-1368) supported trade along the Silk Roads. However, in the 14th Century CE the Mongol Empires fragmented, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) blocked overland connections between the Silk Roads and Europe. Trade between China and Europe continued

using the maritime routes. Vasco da Gama made his first voyage from Portugal to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. The overland Silk Roads soon became used only for local trade, and desert sands reclaimed many of the ancient trading posts (Beckwith, 2009, pp 232-262; Torr, 2018, pp 105-126).

Many different empires established themselves for periods of time in central Asia (Beckwith, 2009). The following diagram, modified from Waugh (2009), shows some of the most important. Though having its capital in the east, the Mongol Empire (1206-1368 CE) extended all the way to Europe.



The Library at Dunhuang

Since it will play a role in much of what will be said about the movement of religions along the Silk Roads, we shall briefly mention the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (洞, dūn, tumulus/mound + 黄, huáng, shining/brilliant). Dunhuang, located on an oasis containing Crescent Lake and is surrounded by sand dunes, was an important stop on the Silk Road from the time of

its beginning in the 2nd Century BCE (Hansen, 2017, pp 288-335). Nearby is the Jade Gate – an opening in the Great Wall of China that allows entrance to the Hexi Corridor connecting the cities of Chang'an and Luoyang to the deserts of Xinjiang in Western China.

Buddhist monks first arrived in Dunhuang in the early centuries of the common era. In the 4th Century CE, they began carving caves into of the sandstone cliffs 25 km southeast of the city. These Mogao Caves – “Caves of a Thousand Buddhas” – are a system of about 500 separate temples decorated with wall paintings and sculptures and connected by intricate stairs and platforms. By the 9th Century, the monk Hong Bian had made the Three Realms Monastery near the caves into an important center of learning. When he died, his statue was placed in Cave 17. On the wall behind him were painted two banyan trees with a water bottle and a cloth bag hanging on the branches. Under one tree an acolyte holds a fan; under the other, a disciple holds the monk's staff.

In 1002 CE the Karakhanids spread into the Taklamakan Desert and destroyed the Buddhist City of Khotan (Sinor, 1990). Though they had once followed both Buddhism and Christianity, the Karakhanids had converted to Islam in 934 CE and considered all other faiths as infidels. Fearful that Dunhuang might also be destroyed, the monks put all their treasured manuscripts and paintings in Cave 17 with the statue of Hong Bian, and sealed the cave off from the outside world (Rong, 1999).

In 1900, while sweeping sand from the temple floor of Cave 17, a Daoist monk, a custodian for the caves, realized that the rear wall was false and discovered that the sealed-off chamber contained piles of ancient manuscripts. In sum there were about 50,000 manuscripts and other objects in the cave, which became known as the “Library Cave.” In 1907 the newly discovered treasure trove was examined by the explorer Aurel

Stein, who purchased many of the manuscripts for the British Museum (Morgan & Walters, 2012). Paul Pelliot visited in 1908 and bought a set of manuscripts for the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

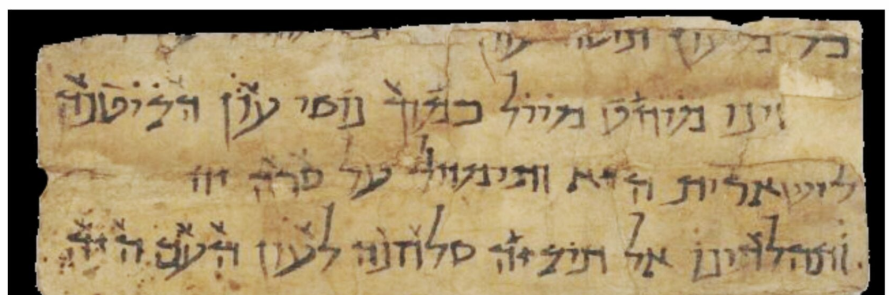
The following illustration shows on the left the entrance to the Mogao Caves. Most of the building is from the 20th Century. On the upper right is the statue of Hong Bian in the Library Cave. On the lower right is an impression of what the cave must have looked like in 1900.



Most of the manuscripts found at Mogao concerned Buddhism and were written in Chinese. However, some of the manuscripts related to other religions such as Manichaeism, Christianity, Judaism and Daoism. Many ancient languages other than Chinese were also represented: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Sogdian, Hebrew, and Old Uyghur.

Judaism

One of the manuscripts from the Library Cave is a Hebrew prayer for forgiveness (*selihah*). At one time it was folded up, perhaps so that it could be carried easily in a small container as an amulet to ward off evil. The text does not directly quote scripture but is very biblical in its wording. The following illustration shows the complete manuscript on the upper left. The photograph has been lightened to facilitate reading. On the upper right is an enlargement of the first 4 lines together with a transcription (Koller, 2024). The English translation of these 4 lines is below together with a quotation from the book of Numbers showing a similar style.



כל מיעון תיסר עון
 [נק]ינו מיחט מײל כמוד גוסי עון הבײטנה
 לישארית הזא ותימחל על סנה זה]
 ותהלתינו אל תיבזה סלחנה לעון העם הזה

every abode(?). Remove iniquity
 we are clean of sin! Who is a God like you, who bears iniquity? Look please
 at this remnant, and pardon for ... this defection
 Do not spurn our praise. Forgive please, the iniquity of this people

Compare: Numbers 14:19

Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people
 according unto the greatness of thy mercy

The manuscript is dated to around 800 CE. This and a few other Hebrew manuscripts from other stations on the Silk Road

suggest that Jewish merchants were involved in the trade between China and the West. There may therefore have been Jews in China during the Tang dynasty or even earlier. A group of Jews in Kaifeng in central China petitioned the emperor to build a synagogue in 1163 CE (Berg, 2024). Their ancestors may have originally travelled to China over the Silk Roads. Their descendants still live today in China.

Zoroastrians

The religion of Zoroastrianism was established toward the end of the second Millennium BCE, and became the state religion of the main Persian Empires: the Achaemenid (559-331 BCE), Parthian (559 BCE – 331 BCE) and Sasanian (224–651 CE). Zoroastrian priests were generally called *magi*.

(i) Biblical Magi

The Gospel of Matthew relates how three *magi* (translated as “wise men”) came from the East to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

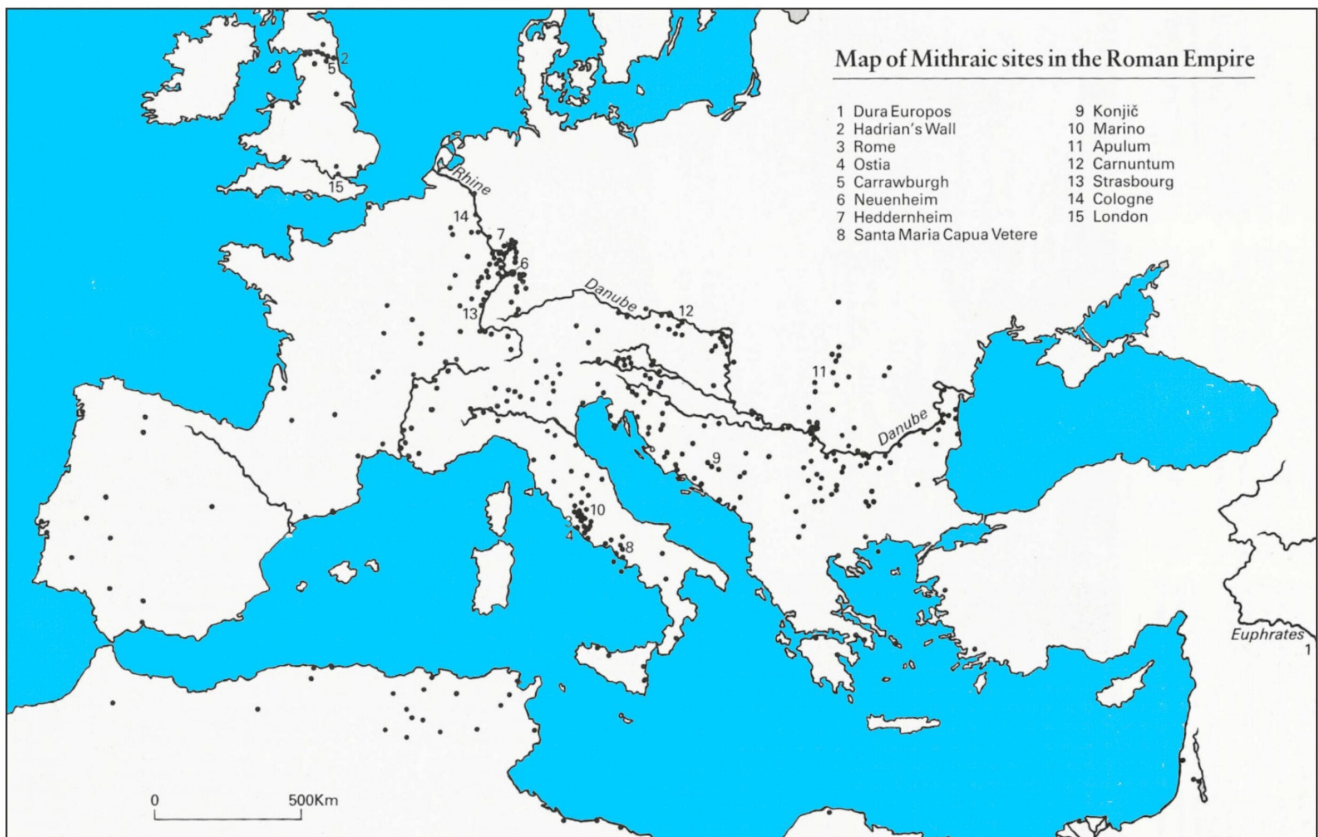
Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (*Matthew 2: 1-2*)

These wise men may have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. If so, they would have travelled along the Silk Roads. The illustration below shows a mosaic representation of the magi from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuove in Ravenna (565 CE). The magi are shown in typical Persian clothing: flowing capes and Phrygian caps.



(ii) Mithraism

Mithraism was a Roman Mystery Cult focused on the God Mithras, one of the many Gods (*yazata*) worshipped in Zoroastrianism. The cult involved secret meetings in underground temples called Mithraea, archeological evidence for which has been found throughout the Roman Empire:



Mithraism was active from about 50 CE to about 300 CE. In the 4th Century CE Christianity was mandated as the sole state religion in the Roman Empire (Edict of Thessalonica, 380 CE). Thereafter Mithraism essentially vanished.

The Mithraeum was set up for a communal feast for the initiates, who were almost always men and mainly soldiers. One essential part of the temple was a fresco or sculpture of Mithras slaying a bull – the “tauroctony.” No one really understands what this sacrifice means. It might have something to do with redemption and salvation, much like the crucifix in a Christian church.

The iconography was stable across its many different locations. In the center, the God Mithras slays the bull. Above are representations of the sun and the moon, and below the bull is attacked by a crab, a snake and a dog. The following illustration shows a tauroctony from the 2nd Century CE unearthed from the Villa Borghese in Rome:



The cult was originally believed to have been imported into the Roman Empire by soldiers who had fought in the Parthian wars, a series of conflicts occurring from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and who had thereby been exposed to the Gods of Zoroastrianism. However, there are relatively few Mithraea in the Eastern reaches of the Empire. And there is no evidence that the worship of Mithra in Persia involved any of the apparent rituals that occurred in the Roman Mithraea. Some have therefore suggested that the cult was a Roman invention (e.g. Stoll, 2022). Indeed, some of the earliest Mithraea are concentrated near the city of Rome (Chalupa, 2016), Nevertheless, the cult was devoted to one of the Zoroastrian gods, and most of the early descriptions of the cult acknowledged its Persian origins (Boyce et al, 1991, pp 468-490).

One possibility is that Roman Mithraism allowed its cult members to embrace an “otherness” and make themselves distinct from their fellows:

the imagery of Mithras dressed in the Persian garment and soft shoes with Phrygian cap on top of his curly hair alluded to the Greek topoi of Persians who were Rome's 'exotic other' and 'fiercest foe'. Such an iconography enabled the Roman Mithraists to depict their god as a foreign deity and to identify themselves as those Roman elites who had the knowledge of worshipping the foreign god. The Oriental imagery of Mithras created a boundary for Mithraic brotherhood and distinguished the cultic community from other forms of religiosity and religious groups in the wider cultural and religious boundaries of Rome. Whatever its origin, the Roman mystery cult of Mithras strongly relied on Roman attitudes and romantic visions of Persia and the Parthians in particular. (Mahzjoo, 2024).

(iii) Sogdians

At the time when trading was at its height, the main middlemen on the Silk Roads were Sogdian merchants (Pin Lyu, 2024). Sogdia was the name for the area of land between the Amu Darya (or Oxus) and the Sri Darya Rivers. Its capital was Samarkand. The following map shows the location of Sogdia in Central Asia. The black lines show several of the Silk Roads:

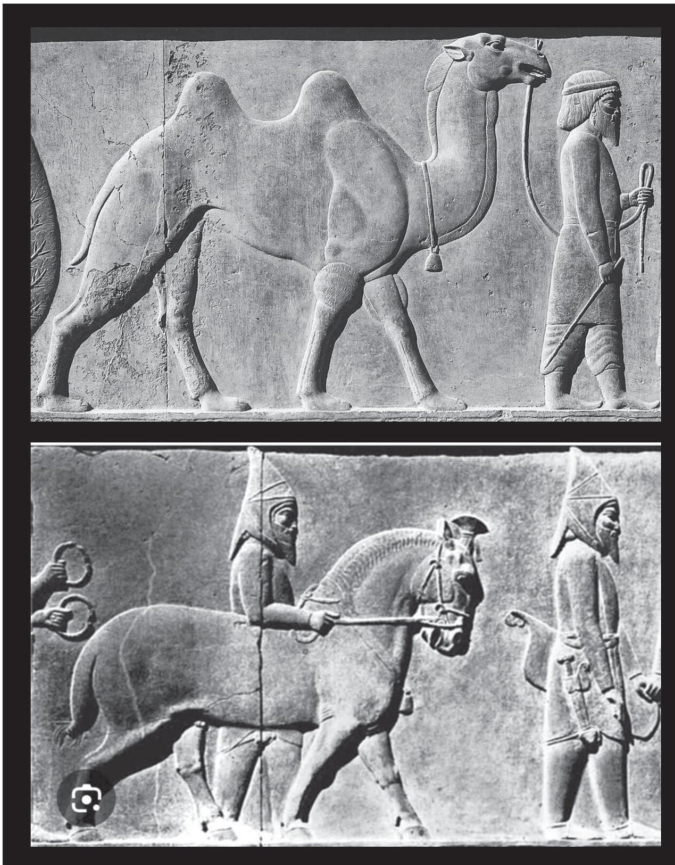


The Sogdians were descendants of the ancient Scythians. At the time of the Achaemenid Empire, when they were known as Saka, they paid tribute to the Persian Emperor in the form of camels and horses.

During the time of the Sasanian Empire, Sogdia was at the eastern limits of the empire and practiced Zoroastrianism (Grenet, 2015). When the empire was invaded by the Muslims, these frontier regions were able to maintain their religious practices for several centuries.

During the Abbasid Caliphate the Sogdians traded extensively with the Chinese and established large merchant colonies in cities of northern China.

The following illustration shows on the left two bas-relief representations of Saka bringing camels and horses to the Emperor at Persepolis (6th-5th Century BCE). On the right is a Tang dynasty porcelain statuette showing a group of Sogdian musicians on a camel. This was found in Xi'an and dates to 723 CE.



Zoroastrian funerary practices mandated that the corpse should not be allowed to pollute either the air or the land. Neither cremation nor burial was possible. Zoroastrians typically laid the corpse out on a stone bed and allowed vultures to strip the flesh from the bones. In China, Zoroastrians compromised by constructing closed tombs within which the deceased was laid out on a funerary couch and allowed to decay above ground. If the deceased was a rich merchant, this funerary bed could be quite ornate. The following illustration shows on the left a carving from a 6th Century Zoroastrian funerary couch in Northern China, now in the Miho Museum in Japan. The upper half of the carving shows a Zoroastrian priest caring for the sacred fire during the funeral service for the deceased. He is recognized by the face mask that prevents him from contaminating the fire with his mortal breath. The mourners are behind the priest. A camel is recognized to the right of the sacred fire, and several pack horses are seen below. The upper right of the illustration shows how the complete

funerary couch was set up.

The lower right shows a small ceramic statuette of a Zoroastrian priest with a face mask. Although he is sometimes considered a camel driver, he is more likely a priest tending to the sacred fire. The face mask is just too typical. The statuette was found in northern China and dates to the 8th Century CE.



Buddhism

Gautama Buddha lived in the northeastern region of India in the 6th or 5th Century BCE. After his death his followers taught the new dharma throughout the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan

Empire (320 BCE–185 BCE) expanded to incorporate Greco-Persian lands in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ashoka (304–232 BCE), the third Mauryan Emperor, promoted Buddhist thought throughout his domain.

(i) Gandhara

Few representations of the Buddha occur from the first centuries of the new religion. Since the teaching proclaimed that the everyday world was transient and misleading, artistic representations may have been considered unworthy. This changed when the faithful encountered artists of the Greco-Persian world in a region of northwest India called Gandhara. Realistic sculptures of the Buddha and his disciples proliferated. The following illustrations shows sculpture of the Buddha made in the Gandhara from the 1st, 2nd and 5th Centuries CE:



(ii) Colossal Buddhas

As their religion spread along the Silk Roads, Buddhist monks

began to carve statues of the Buddha out of the sandstone cliffs along the route. Some of these assumed colossal sizes (Wong, 2019). The earliest large Buddhas, up to 15 m tall, were carved at the Yungang Grottoes near Datong in Northern China beginning in 465 CE. Colossal seated Buddhas, 33 and 23 m tall, were carved in the Mogao caves near Dunhuang in the 7th and 8th Centuries CE.

And around 600 CE, in Bamiyan, located in present-day Afghanistan, 130 km northwest of Kabul, two huge standing Buddhas were carved, one 38 m and the other 55 m tall. Since details such as the folds in the robe and the facial features could not be carved in the sandstone, these were added to the rough-hewn statues using stucco. The arms were constructed using stucco on wooden armatures. Over the years much of the stucco work eroded away leaving the large ungainly limestone forms.

The people in the area when the statues were carved were Hephthalites. These people followed several different religions (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism) and tolerated the work of the Buddhist monks.

In 2001 the Taliban enforced a Muslim edict forbidding artistic representations of human beings. The two Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.

The following illustration shows at the top a panorama of the Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley before their destruction. The lower left of the illustration shows a close-up of the larger of the two Buddhas. The lower right compares before and after its destruction.



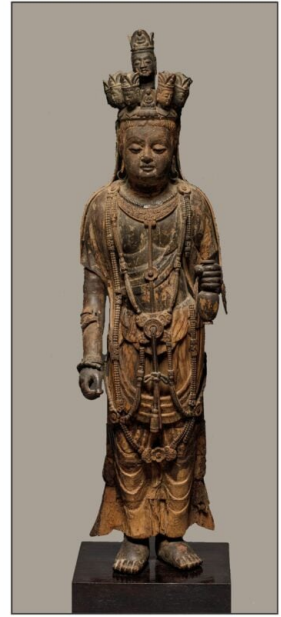
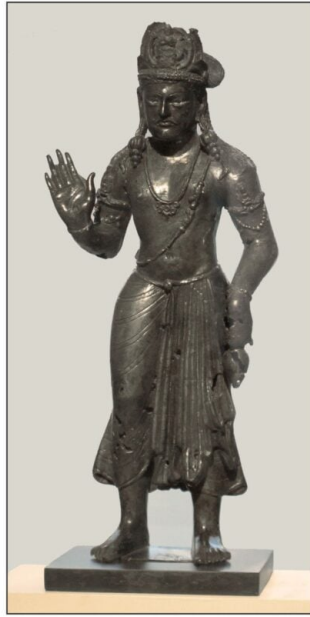
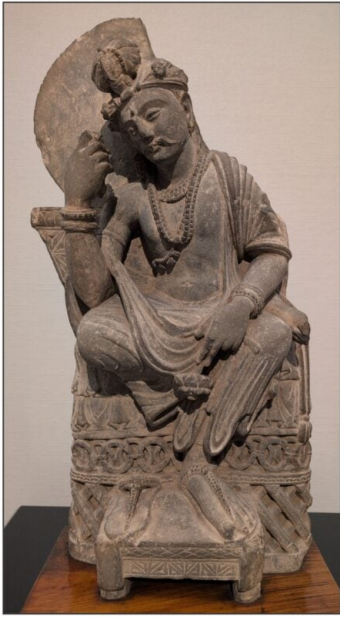
(iii) Avalokitesvara

Avalokitesvara was the bodhisattva of compassion. His name in Sanskrit means “he who looks down,” i.e. he who considers the concerns of the faithful. As Avalokitesvara travelled along the Silk Roads to China he slowly changed gender from male to female (Stein, 1986; Suebsantiwongse, 2025; Yu, 2001). In China she became known as *Guānshìyīn*, (觀世音, look/observe+people/world +sound/voice: “the one who perceives the cries of the world”) or Guanyin. As the deity moved to Japan, she became known as Kannon, and veered back toward masculinity.

Avalokitesvara characteristically holds a lotus flower and sometimes prayer bead. Sometimes he or she has multiple heads which make her vision and hearing more acute. Occasionally the deity has multiple arms the better to aid those in need. As Guanyin, she often carries a vase of pure water to relieve suffering.

The following illustration shows the transformation of Avalokitesvara. In order from left to right and then from up to down:

1. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 3rd Century CE
2. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 4th Century CE
3. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Northern China, 6th Century CE
4. Wood, Avalokitesvara with multiple heads, Northern China 11th Century CE
5. Wood, Avalokitesvara "seated at royal ease," China, 11th Century CE
6. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Nepal, 14th Century CE
7. Gilded Wood, Kannon, Japan 11th Century CE
8. Porcelain, Guanyin, China 17th Century CE
9. Jade, Guanyin, China, 19th Century CE
10. Titanium callosal statue (78 m) Nanshan Guanyin, Hainan Island, 21st Century CE



(iv) The Diamond Sutra

As Buddhism travelled along the Silk Roads to China, the sacred texts began to be translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. One of the most important translators was Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) who was born in Kuqa on the northern edge of the Taklamakan desert. His father was a Buddhist monk from Kashmir. Around 400 CE Kumarajiva travelled to Chang'an where he wrote most of his translations of the Buddhist literature.

The original Diamond Sutra was likely composed shortly after the time of Gautama Buddha's life in the 5th Century BCE. However, it was not formally written down in Sanskrit until the 2nd or 3rd Century CE. The sutra narrates a dialogue between the Buddha and his elderly disciple Subhūti about the nature of reality and how to attain the wisdom that would release one from suffering. The world is transient and illusory; one must release oneself from any attachments; one must seek emptiness. The following is from Red Pine's introduction to his translation of the sutra (2001):

following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own, and every-thing is therefore empty, and this emptiness is the true nature of reality. Later, when the Buddha began teaching people to view emptiness itself as empty and to put the emptiness of emptiness to work in the liberation of all beings, few disciples grasped this new teaching, which he called the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom beyond wisdom.

One of the most important discoveries in the Mogao Caves near

Dunhuang was a woodblock-printed copy of Kumarajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra. The pages were printed by Wang Jie in 868 CE, probably in Sichuan, and then pasted together to form a scroll about 5 m long. The colophon gives the date and notes that the sutra was being made freely available to all who wished to read. This is the oldest printed book of which we have a copy.

The frontispiece of the scroll shows a woodblock drawing of the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas, and supernatural guardians. In the lower left is the disciple Subhūti. The following illustration shows this print together with details of the Buddha and his disciple redrawn by Zhao Ming An.



The following illustration shows the first page of text in the scroll along with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first few words of the sutra:

→ 金	剛	般若	波羅蜜	經
jīn	gāng	bōrě	bōluómì	jīng
precious	strong	prajna	paramita	sacred text
diamond	wisdom	perfection		sutra
Diamond Sutra of Perfect Wisdom				

→ 如	是	我	聞。	
rú	shì	wǒ	wén	
as	true	I	hear	
	thus	we	listen	
一	時	佛	在	舍
yī	shí	fó	zài	shè
one	time	Buddha	be at	house
once			hotel	
衛	國	獨	園。	
wèi	guó	dú	yuán	
protect	country	alone	garden	park

Thus I have heard. Once, the Buddha was staying in the Anathapindada's Park

凡欲讀經先念淨口業... 摩訶循唎 循唎 娑婆訶
 奉請除災金剛 奉請辟婁金剛 奉請黃隨求金剛
 奉請白淨水金剛 奉請赤聲金剛 奉請定除尼金剛
 奉請紫賢金剛 奉請大神金剛
 金剛般若波羅蜜經
 如是我聞一時佛在舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園與大
 比丘眾千二百五十人俱尔時世尊食時著衣持
 鉢入舍衛大城乞食於其城中次第乞已還至本處
 飯食訖收衣鉢洗足已敷座而坐時長老須菩提在大
 眾中即從坐起偏袒右肩右膝著地合掌恭敬而
 白佛言希有世尊如來善護念諸菩薩善付囑諸
 菩薩世尊善男子善女人發阿耨多羅三藐三菩
 提心應云何往云何降伏其心佛言善哉善哉須菩
 提如汝所說如來善護念諸菩薩善付囑諸菩薩
 汝今諦聽當為汝說善男子善女人發阿耨多羅三
 藐三菩提心應如是住如是降伏其心唯然世尊
 願樂欲聞

And the following illustration shows the last page of the scroll which includes the famous verse that the Buddha uses to describe the transience of the world. On the left, a character-by-character translation is followed by the English version of Red Pine, based on both the Sanskrit and the Chinese versions of the sutra (2001):

一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。
yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ
everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma
如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影
rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng
as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow
如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。
rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn
as like dew mist also as like lightning	as like dew mist also as like lightning	as like dew mist also as like lightning	as like dew mist also as like lightning	as like dew mist also as like lightning
應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀
yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān
answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe

As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning
view all created things like this.

Christianity

During the first 4 centuries of Christianity, the nature of Jesus as both God and Man was extensively discussed. One position was that Jesus was of two distinct natures – *dyophysite*; another was that his two aspects were conjoined as one – *miaphysite*; and yet another was that his Jesus became fully divine – *monophysite*. Though these old distinctions are almost impossible to understand in modern times, in the 5th Century CE they were matters of life and death. The Church of the East (also known as the Assyrian Church) distinguished itself as *miaphysite*, and became separate from the *dyophysite* Byzantine and Roman Churches in 451CE. These latter churches condemned as heretical the *monophysite* teachings of Nestorius, a theologian in the 5th Century. The Church of the East is often known as the “Nestorian Church,” although its views on

the nature of Jesus actually differed from those of Nestorius (Brock, 1996). Although the Church of the East remained separate from the Western Churches for many centuries, it has now established communal relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

(i) The Dunhuang Gloria

Among the manuscripts found in the Mogao caves was a Chinese Christian Hymn loosely based on the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest), also known as the Greater Doxology (words of praise), especially the version used in the Church of the East. The manuscript was probably written about 800 CE and provides clear evidence that missionaries of the Church of the East had travelled on the Silk Roads to China and were actively proselytizing there centuries before the Jesuits first arrived in the 15th Century CE (Moule, 1930, Teng Li, 2024).

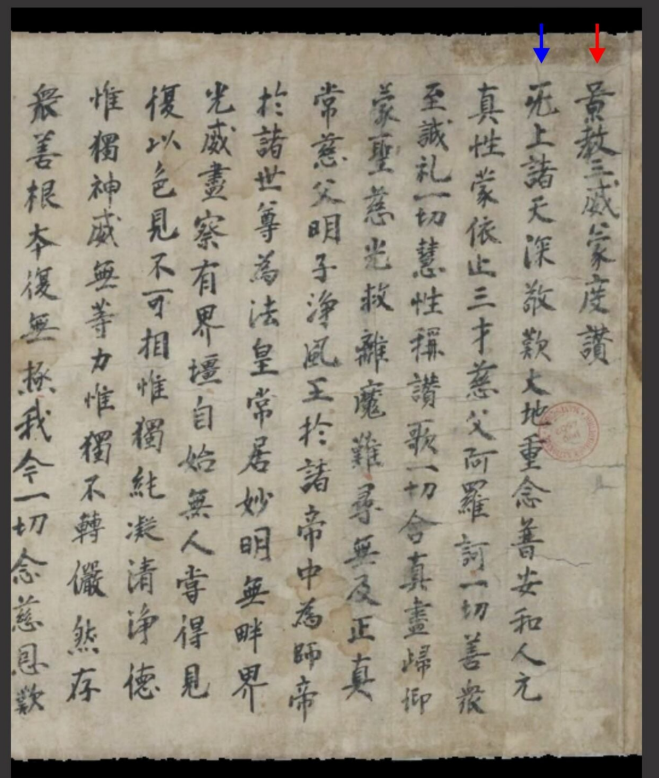
The hymn has 11 verses each containing 4 lines of length 7 syllables, in keeping with Chinese poetic practice. The following illustration shows the beginning of the hymn together with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first line.

→	景	教	三	威
	jǐng	jiào	sān	wēi
	bright brilliant	teaching	three	power majesty
	蒙	度	讚	
	méng	dù	zàn	
	receive	save	praise	

The Brilliant Teaching of the Three Majesties for Obtaining Salvation.

→	無(无)	上	諸(诸)	天	深	敬	歎
	wú	shàng	zhū	tiān	shēn	jìng	tàn
	if not without	above high	every all	sky heaven	deep very	respect honor	praise

If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore



The following is a translation of the first three verses of the hymn (Moule, 1930, p 53; Henson, 2017, p 329)

If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore,
 If the great earth earnestly ponders on general peace
 and harmony,
 If man's first true nature receives confidence and
 rest,
 It is due to Alohê the merciful Father of the universe.

All the congregation of the good worship with complete
 sincerity;
 All enlightened natures praise and sing;
 All who have souls trust and look up to the utmost;
 Receiving holy merciful light to save from the devil.

Hard to find, impossible to reach, upright, true,
 eternal,
 Merciful Father, shining Son, holy Spirit, King,
 Among all rulers you are Master Ruler,
 Among all the world-honoured you are spiritual Monarch

“Alohê” is a Chinese transcription of the Syriac name for God.

(ii) The *Jingjiao* Stele

In 781 CE a monument dedicated to the Christian faith (景教, *jingjiao*, luminous religion) was erected in Chang’an (Keevak, 2008; McGrath, 2021). The limestone stele is almost 3 m high. At the top is a cross and a nine-character title. The following illustration shows the stele *in situ* (before it was moved to a museum), an enlargement of the title, and a character-by-character translation.



大	秦	景	教	流	行
dà	qín	Jǐng	jiào	liú	xíng
large	state	bright	teaching	spread	travel
Roman Empire		Christianity			
中	国	碑			
zhōng	guó	bēi			
middle	kingdom	monument			
China					

Monument to the Propagation of the Luminous Religion of Rome in China

The stele summarizes the beliefs of the Christian Church in an inscription of about 1900 characters. This mentions that the Christian church was first established in China in 635 CE through the efforts of the monk Alopen. At the bottom of the stele is a much shorter inscription in Syriac.

After the end of the Tang dynasty 907 CE, Christianity almost disappeared (Teng Li, 2024). The *Jingjiao* Stele was buried, either for protection by the monks or as an act of desecration by those who reviled the foreign religion. It was unearthed during the 17th Century.

Nevertheless, the Church of the East continued to send missionaries along the Silk Roads and several centuries later, Christian Churches were built throughout the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368) were tolerant of the different religions. The foreign religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism contributed as much to society as the homegrown Daoism and Confucianism.

Manichaeism

Mani (216-274 CE) was a Persian prophet who conceived the world as divided between the light and the dark. He taught that the human soul was imprisoned by birth into the material world, and that the suffering that this entailed would only cease at death, which released the soul from the body. If one died free from sin, one's soul would return to the realm of light. The dualistic religion that he founded – Manichaeism – flourished in the centuries after his death, spreading all the way to Spain in the west and China in the East.

(i) Spread to Europe

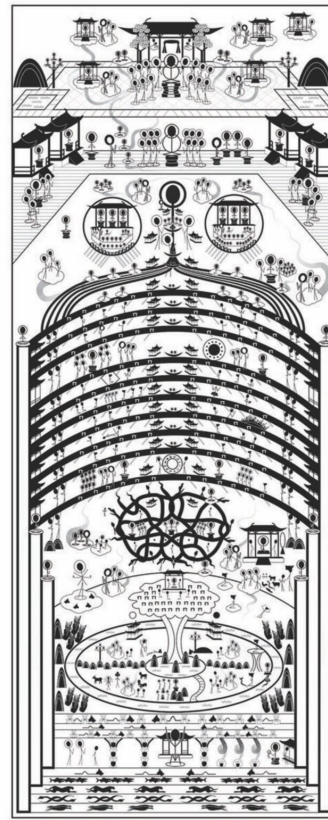
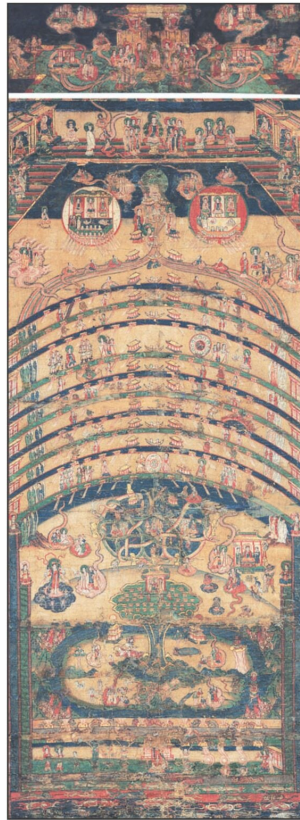
In Europe, Manichaeism declined after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. However, some isolated groups, such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Southeast France, continued to follow Mani's teachings:



(ii) Spread to China

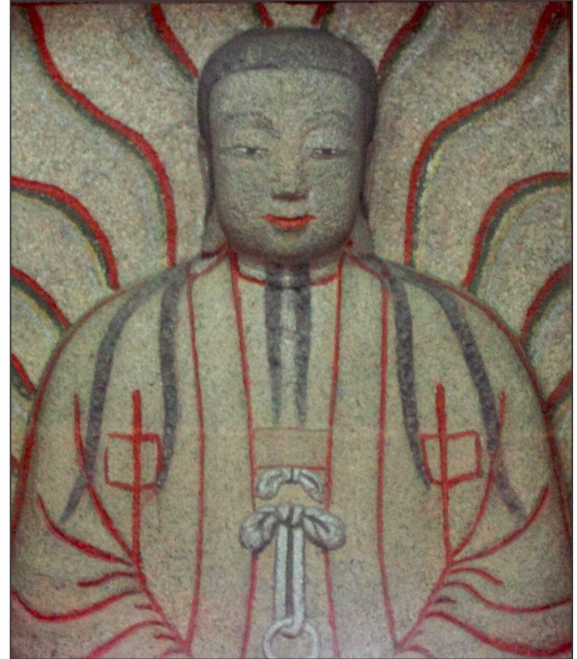
Manichaeism spread along the Silk Roads into China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). During the Uyghur Kahnate (744–840 CE) in what is now Northern China and Mongolia, Manichaeism was acknowledged as the state religion (Mackerras, 1990).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), a large silk painting (158 by 60 centimetres) was made to illustrate the Manichaean cosmology. This showed the realm of light at the top. In the center was a representation of the judgment that occurs at death: the decision whether the soul is released into the realm of light or sent back to the hell on earth. The following illustration shows the painting with some explanatory analysis (Gulaczi, 2015, pp 247-258), and enlargements showing a portrait of Mani (from the left side of the New Aeon level) and details of the tangled judgement process:



Realm of Light
 New Aeon
 Liberation of Light
 Ten Firmaments of the Sky
 Atmosphere (Judgement, Transmigration)
 Earth

In Cao'an a small town on the west coast of China, a small temple built in 1339 CE was dedicated to Mani, the "Buddha of Light" (Lieu, 1998, pp 188-193). Over the years the temple became used for Buddhist practices. The following illustration shows the bas-relief portrait of Mani over the altar and the inscribed stone in the grounds of the temple.



The inscription reads

Purity (清淨, *qīngjìng*), Light (光明, *guāngmíng*),

Power (大力, *dàlì*), Wisdom (智慧, *zhìhuì*)

Supreme (無上, *wúshàng*), Ultimate Truth (至真, *zhìzhēn*)

Mani (摩尼, *móní*), the Buddha of Light (光佛, *guāngfú*)

The first four are the attributes of the Manichaean Heavenly Father. Mani considered himself as a prophet in the line of Zoroaster, Buddha and Christ. As such he could be conceived as one of the manifestations of the divine – the Buddha of Light.

Islam

After its founding in Arabia in 622 CE, Islam quickly spread to adjacent regions. By the time of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), the community of the faithful (*Ummah*) extended all the way from Spain to the borders of China:



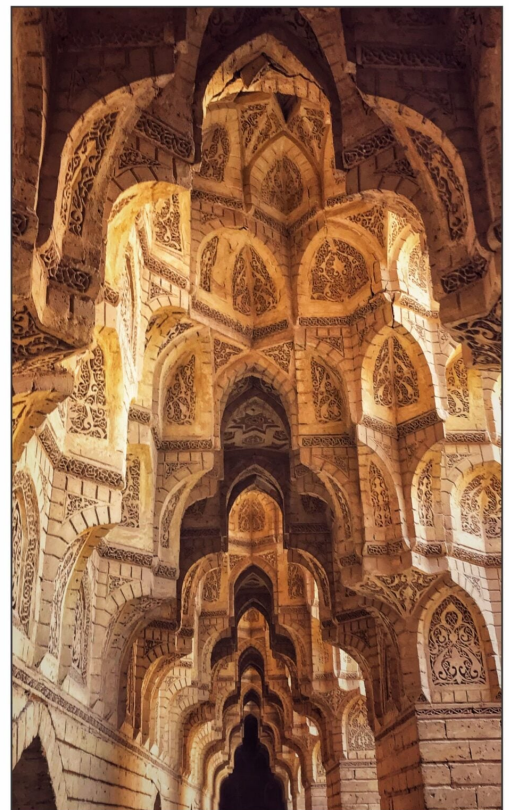
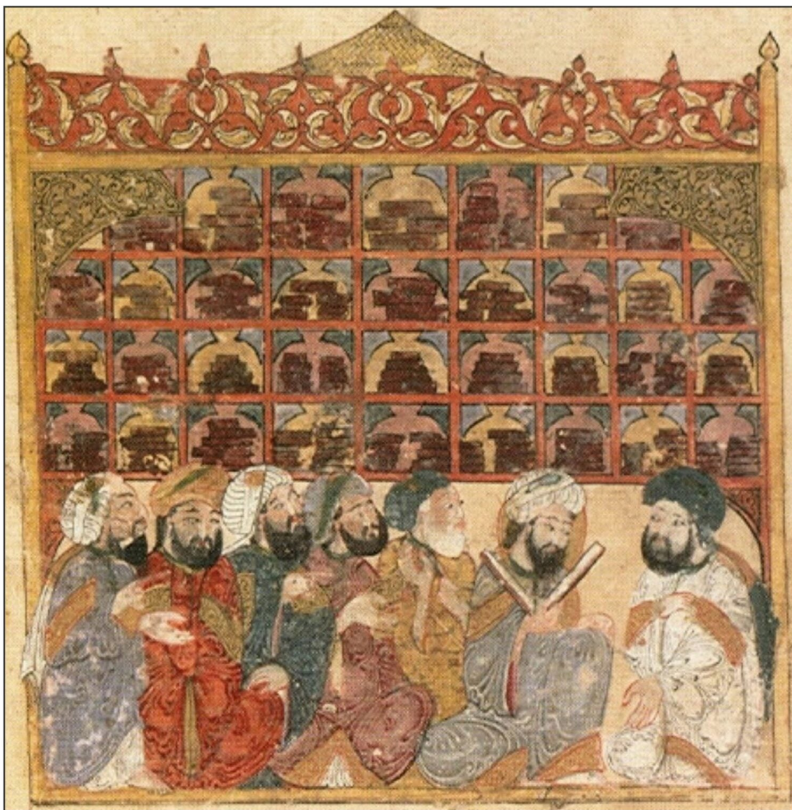
(i) Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate with its capital in Baghdad oversaw a period of great prosperity and learning, that later became known as the Islamic Golden Age. At a time when Europe was going through the Dark Ages, Baghdad was a place where scholars studied and preserved the literature of the past and contributed to our knowledge such new ideas as algebra and trigonometry. Islamic physicians distinguished different diseases, and Islamic physicists mapped the heavens. Abbasid architecture developed gorgeous arches and domes, stucco decoration with arabesque patterns, and walls covered with multicolored tiling.

The Abbasids made great use of the newly discovered paper (Schatzmler, 2018). The technology of papermaking originated in China around the 1st Century CE and was brought to the Middle East through the Silk Roads. The first paper mill in Baghdad was built in 795 CE. Paper made it easy to provide inexpensive books for scholars to study. Knowledge became no

longer limited to the elites.

The following illustration shows on the left a painting of a scholars in a library during the Abbasid Caliphate taken from a 13th Century manuscript. This may represent the House of Wisdom, also known as the Grand Library of Baghdad, which was founded in the 8th Century CE. On the right is a photograph of a honeycomb archway (*muquarnas*) from the Abbasid Palace in Baghdad built in the 12th Century CE.

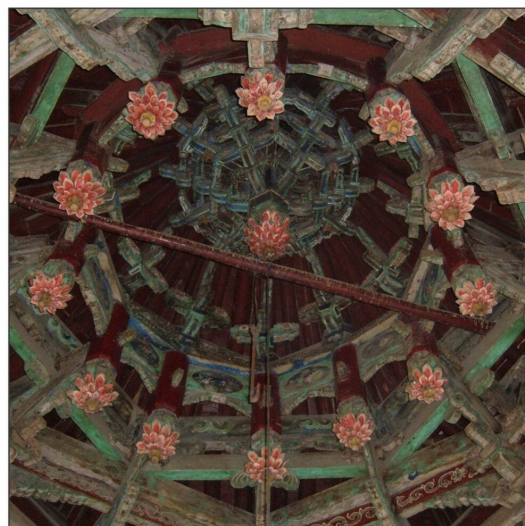
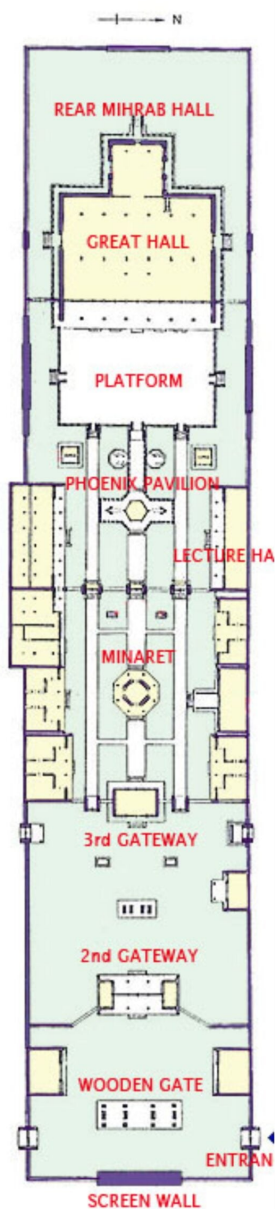


(ii) The Great Mosque in Xi'an

Islamic merchants came to China along the Silk Roads. By the 8th Century the Muslim population of Chang'an (Xi'an) was sufficient to warrant the building of a mosque in the form of a temple. The Great Mosque of Xi'an (清真寺, *Xī'ān Dà Qīngzhēnsì*) was first constructed in 742 CE, and rebuilt in its present form in 1384. Islam was referred to as 清真 (Qīngzhēnjiào: pure and true religion), and a mosque is

generally referred to as 清真寺 (*Qīngzhēnsì*: pure and true temple).

The following illustration shows a plan of the mosque together with photographs of the Phoenix Pavillion (凤亭, *fèng tíng*), the “Examining the heart tower” (省心楼, *shěng xīn lóu*) which probably served as a minaret, and the ceiling of the Phoenix Pavilion:



Epilogue

For many centuries the Silk Roads were a conduit for goods to

travel between East and West. The East produced silk, paper, tea, and porcelain. The West gave gold, silver, glass, cotton, and leather. The regions along the Silk Roads provided horses, camels, rugs, lapis lazuli and jade.

As well the Silk Roads allowed different religions to travel to distant countries. Buddhism came to China. Islam spread to both the East and the West. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also journeyed with the caravans. Travellers on the Silk Roads were missionaries as well as merchants (Foltz, 2010).

Some feeling for the people of the Silk Roads can be found in the poem *The Golden Road to Samarkand* by James Elroy Flecker (1814-1915), a British poet who briefly worked in the consular services in the Middle East before dying at a young age of tuberculosis. The conclusion to his play *Hassan*, published posthumously in 1922, is a conversation among the members of a caravan about to leave Baghdad for Samarkand:

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further: it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow
Across that angry or that glimmering sea.

White on a throne or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand

...

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:

For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The following is a reading of these verses by Roger Helmer

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Flecker-Golden-Road-Helmer.mp3>

And the musical introduction to the Japanese TV series on The Silk Roads by Kitaro:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Kitaro-Silk-Road-Theme.mp3>

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The Divine Feminine

All the major religions of the present world are androcentric in nature and misogynistic in practice. The following are some typical injunctions in the Christian scriptures:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (*I Corinthians* 14: 34-35)

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (*I Timothy* 2: 11-12)

These rulings are in spite of (or perhaps because of) women being more attentive to religious teachings, and participating more often in religious services than men (Pew Research Foundation, 2016). The two passages nevertheless serve a purpose – they provide clear evidence that the New Testament does not always represent the word of God.

The androcentricity of organized religion differs completely from prehistoric religious beliefs, wherein God was more likely female than male (Stone, 1978). Over recent centuries, however, female aspects of the godhead have become more and more recognized. This posting briefly considers some of the manifestations of the divine feminine, and mentions what might be involved in a feminist theology.

The Primordial Mother

In prehistoric families, the most amazing and incomprehensible

event was the birth of a child. The role of the father was little understood, and mothers were revered as the primary source of this new life. A female force was therefore naturally thought to be behind the creation of the universe, and was worshipped as a mother goddess (Graves, 1948; Neumann, 1963; Stone, 1978). Between 30,000 and 10,000 years BCE, small votive offerings to the mother goddess – “Venus figurines” – were created throughout Europe. The illustration below shows (from left to right) the ceramic Venus of Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, the limestone Venus of Willendorf in Austria and the serpentine Venus of Savignano in Italy:



Barstow (1983) describes these figurines:

The goddess was faceless, as if to accentuate her universality, her ability to “stand for the power of the female. Lacking feet, she appeared to come straight up out of the earth, with which she was identified. Unclothed, her every body seem to have an efficacy. Often – but not always – she was big-breasted, and her hands were frequently placed under her breasts as if to display them. Many figurines show

her entire body as ample, with huge breasts, belly and buttocks, as if the very plenitude of her body would ensure plentiful crops and hers. Sometimes she is pregnant, her enlarged belly emphasized by special markings.

In neolithic times, most societies began to worship multiple divinities, though female forces were among the most important – Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Astarte in Canaan, Persephone in Greece. and Isis in Egypt. These goddesses often displayed two aspects: one related to life and fertility and the other to death and war.

These goddesses were widely worshipped, with their followers often participating in extended rites called the “mysteries.”

Apuleius’ Latin novel *The Golden Ass* (2nd Century CE) tells the story of Lucius who, while dabbling in the magic arts, inadvertently turned himself into an ass. At the end of the book, he attends one of the mysteries, and is changed back to human form through the power of Isis. The goddess announces herself:

I am here before you, Lucius, moved by your prayers—mother of the natural world, mistress of all the elements, firstborn offspring of the ages, highest of the deities, queen of the dead, first among the gods, the manifestation in a single body of all the gods and goddesses. I control by my will the luminous summits of the sky, the salubrious breezes of the sea, and the mournful silence of the underworld. I am the single divine being, worshipped the world over in different forms, with varying rites and under a multitude of names. Some call me Juno, others Bellona, some Hecate, and yet others Rhamnusia. But the people on both sides of Ethiopia who are lit by the first rays of the rising sun, and the Egyptians, pre-eminent for their ancient knowledge, worship me with the proper rituals and by my true name: Queen Isis. (Translation of Singer and Finkelparl, 2021, pp 158-60)

The illustration below shows a pectoral ornament in the form of a winged Isis from the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. In her right hand, she holds an *ankh*, the symbol for “life”; in her left hand she holds what may be the hieroglyph for a sail, the symbol for the breath of life. On her head is a throne, indicating her majesty.



Judaism – Wisdom and Shekhinah

In the Hebrew scriptures Jahweh is most definitely male, and there is little mention of any female aspect to the deity. However, in *Proverbs* there are several passages spoken by the female figure of Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), one of which reads

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:
When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:
When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth:
Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;
Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. (*Proverbs*, 8 22-31)

Christians have interpreted this passage as referring to Christ the Son, who they believe was with God the Father before the world began. Christ is described as “the power of God and the wisdom of God” in *I Corinthians* 1:24.

This female figure of Wisdom in *Proverbs* is closely associated with *Sophia*— the goddess of wisdom and the creator of the world in Gnostic scriptures (Perkins, 1985).

Wisdom also became related to the concept of the *Shekhinah* – God’s “presence” or “immanence” in the world. This concept was initially used to describe the holiness of the Ark of the Covenant, but expanded to include the idea of God’s dwelling with his people. *Shekhinah* is manifest when believers gather to study the Torah, celebrate the Sabbath, or pray together. The Mishnah (probably derived from Jewish oral tradition in the centuries BCE) states

If two sit together and there are words of Torah spoken between them, then the Shekhinah abides among them (*Pirkei Avot*, 3:2)

In the medieval period, the presence of God in the world was conceived as in terms of the ten *Sephiroth* of the *Kabbalah*. The tenth *Sephirah* is known either as *Malkuth* (“kingdom”) or *Shekhinah* (“presence”). In Kabbalistic writings the *Shekhinah*

became the female aspect of the Godhead (Smith, 1985; Scholem, 1991; Devine, 2014; Laura, 2015).

In the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (13th Century CE), the *Shekhinah* is considered as the intermediary between God and his people:

Every message the King requires goes forth from this Lady's house. Any message from below that is sent to the King arrives first at the house of His Lady, and from there proceeds to the King. The Lady is thus the universal go-between, from above to below and from below to above. (*Zohar* 2:51a quoted by Green, 2002).

Scholem (1965) describes the uneasy status of *Shekhinah* in Jewish religious thought:

This discovery of a feminine element in God, which the Kabbalists tried to justify by gnostic exegesis, is of course one of the most significant steps they took. Often regarded with the utmost misgiving by strictly Rabbinical, non-Kabbalistic Jews, often distorted into inoffensiveness by embarrassed Kabbalistic apologists, this mythical conception of the feminine principle of the *Shekhinah* as a providential guide of Creation achieved enormous popularity among the masses of the Jewish people, so showing that here the Kabbalists had uncovered one of the primordial religious impulses still latent in Judaism. (p. 105).

Christianity – Mother Mary

Mary, mother of Jesus, is not considered extensively in the Christian scriptures. Outside of five main episodes – the angelic annunciation of the forthcoming virgin birth, the visitation with Elizabeth, the nativity of Christ, presentation of Jesus in the temple, and the crucifixion, she is scarcely mentioned. In one brief episode she visited her son while he was teaching and was ignored (Mark 6: 31-34). However, Christ did acknowledge her at the crucifixion,

telling John, "Behold thy Mother!" (John 19: 26-27).

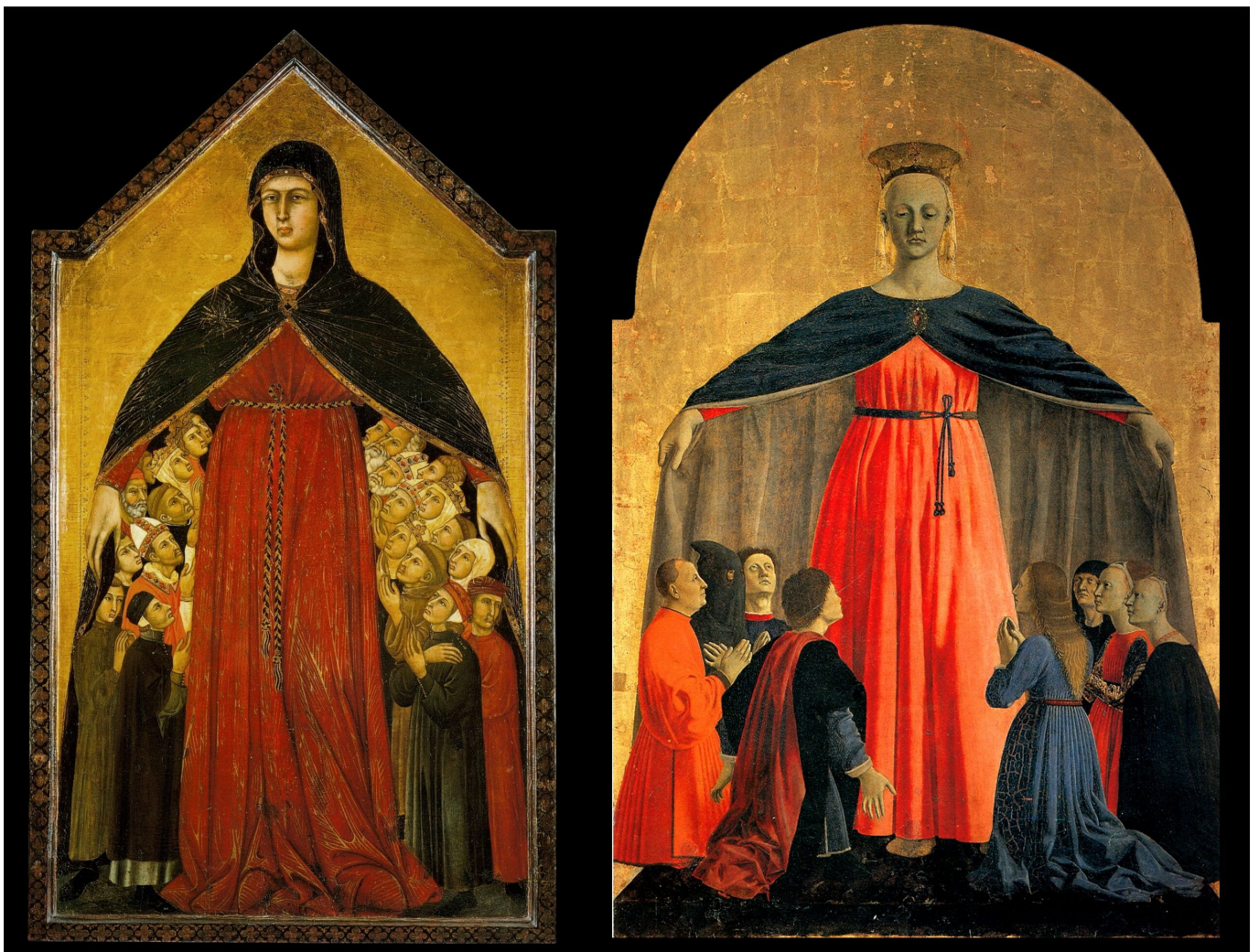
Mary was not mentioned in the first version of the Nicene Creed of 325 CE, but acknowledged as the virgin mother of Christ in the revised version of the creed in 381 CE:

Jesus Christ ... who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man

Since Christ was both God and Man, his mother was special – *Theotokos*, the bearer of God. This was first pronounced at the council of Ephesus in 431 CE. Mary the mother of God has been long venerated in the Eastern churches. The illustration below shows the mosaic (9th Century CE) in the cathedral (now mosque) of the *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople, and the icon of Mary and the Infant Jesus of Vladimir (1131 CE).



After the turn of the 1st Millennium CE, Mary began to be more and more honored in the Western Church. No one really understands this change in religious feeling. Most of the new Gothic Cathedrals in France were dedicated to *Notre Dame* (“our Lady”), and special Lady Chapels were built in English cathedrals. Believers thronged to images of Mary for consolation and for mercy. The following illustration shows two representations of the *Madonna della Misericordia* (“Lady of Mercy”), by Simone Martini (1310) and Piero della Francesca (1462).



Various traditions and beliefs have accumulated over the years so that now Marianism is an acknowledged subset of Christian beliefs, particularly in the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches (Johnston, 1985; Leith, 2021; Matter, 1983; Rubin, 2009). In 1568 the *Ave Maria* was included in the Roman

Catholic Breviary. The most famous setting of the prayer is by Gounod (1859) based on Bach's Prelude No 1 (1722).

Ave Maria, gratia plena,	Hail
Mary, full of grace,	
Dominus tecum	the Lord
is with thee	
benedicta tu in mulieribus	Blessed art
thou amongst women,	
et benedictus fructus ventris tuis, Jesu	and blessed is
the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.	
Sancta Maria, Mater dei,	Holy Mary,
Mother of God,	
ora pro nobis peccatoribus	pray for us
sinner,	
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.	now and at
the hour of our death.	

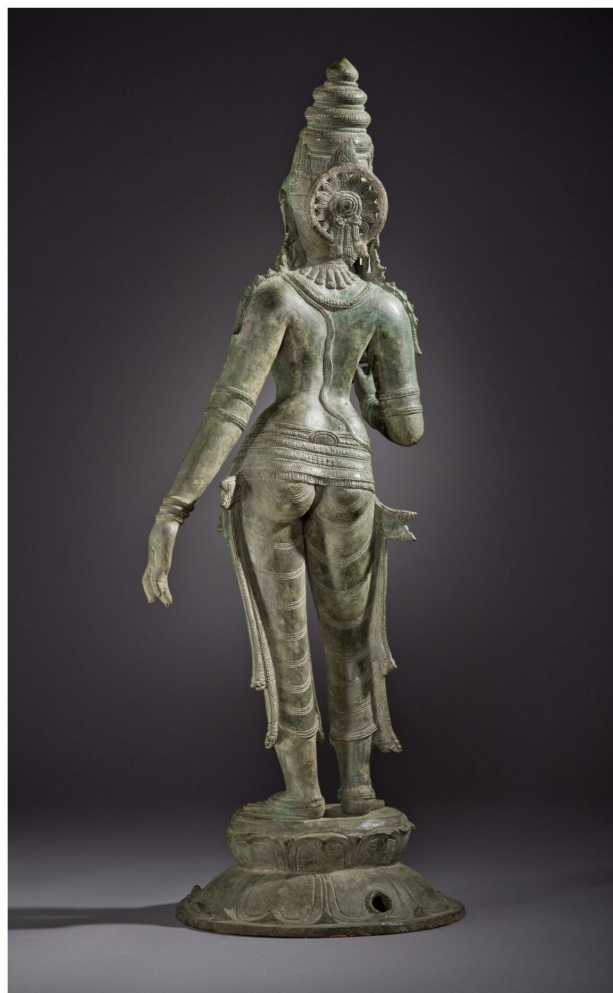
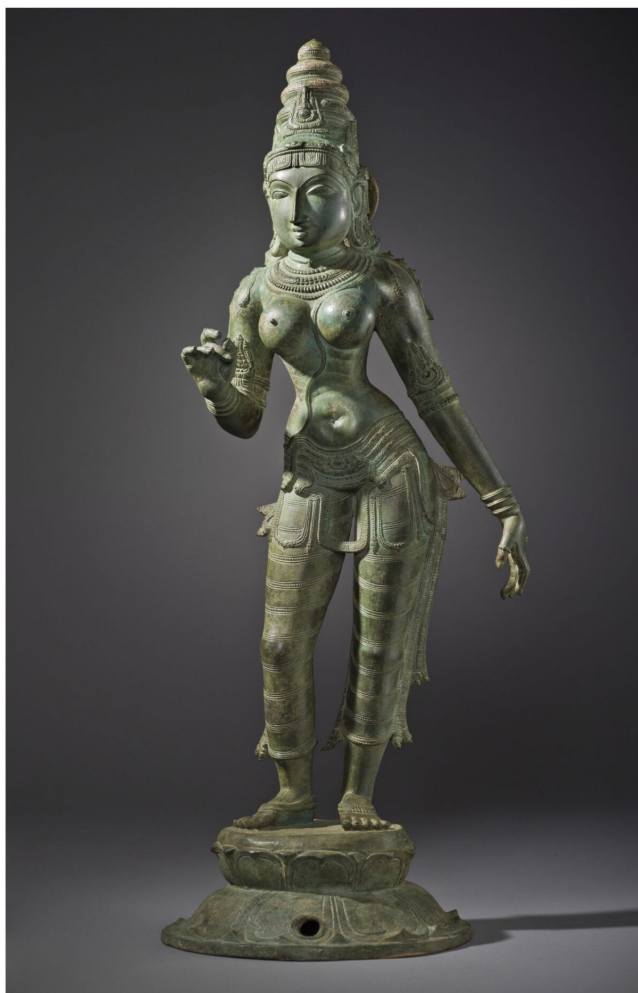
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/13-Ave-Maria.m4a>

Theologians have long argued that Mary must have been herself conceived without sin so that she might carry the incarnation of God within her womb. This doctrine of the "immaculate conception" was discussed for many years, but only finally accepted by the Vatican in 1854. Since Mary was without sin, there was no need for her to die. Theologians therefore proposed that before her death she was instead taken up directly into heaven – "the assumption of the Virgin." This idea finally becoming Catholic doctrine in 1950. Protestants reject both these doctrines. When it comes to Mary, the Christian churches have been loathe to allow their members the beliefs they long for.

Hinduism

In contrast with the Western (or Abrahamic) religions, Hinduism is adorned with goddesses of many types and purposes (Kinsley, 1986; Pattanaik, 2000). Eroticism is an acknowledged part of divinity.

The supreme goddess *Mahadevi* is widely venerated. She changes form at will and goes by many names. She can exist alone as *Shakti*, the goddess of cosmic energy, or as *Kali*, the goddess of time and change. The illustration below shows a bronze statue of *Bhudevi*, the “Goddess of the Earth” (13th Century CE) from the Los Angeles Museum of Art



The female goddess often serves as the consort of a male divinity – *Parvati* with *Shiva*, and *Lakshmi* with *Vishnu*. Sometimes these pairs become unified into one deity – the androgynous *Ardhanarishvara*, whose right side is feminine and

left side male. The illustration below shows a sandstone relief of *Shiva and Parvati* (11th Century CE) from the Dallas Museum of Art, and a bronze *Ardhanarishvara* (circa 1000 CE) from the Los Angeles Museum of Art.



Buddhism

Buddhism is often considered as a religion without the need for gods or goddesses. Since the universe has existed forever there is no need to postulate a divine force that once created it. However, the Buddha in his various manifestations and many of his enlightened followers (the *Bodhisattvas*, from *bodhi*, knowledge, and *sattva*, being) are revered as sincerely as any of the gods in more definitely theistic religions.

The Buddha and most of the Bodhisattvas are male. The hierarchy of priests and monks in Buddhism are male (Faure,

2008). However, over the centuries the feminine has made its appearance.

One of the most important of the Bodhisattvas was known as *Avalokitasvara* – “the lord (*isvara*) who gazes (*lokita*) down (*ava*) at the world.” This Bodhisattva of Compassion is described as the “Regarder of the Cries of the World” (Reeves, 2008) in Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra* (the Sanskrit original deriving from the 1st century CE, Chinese translations occurring in the third to sixth Centuries CE).

As the centuries passed and as Buddhism spread from its origin in India to Tibet, China and South East Asia, *Avalokitasvara* changed into female form (Yü, 2000). In Tibet, the Bodhisattva became *Tara* (Blofeld, 1979; Shaw, 2006). Tara herself is manifest in many different ways. Among them are white Tara, the goddess of Compassion, and green Tara, the goddess of Enlightenment. The illustration below shows an Indian stone sculpture of *Avalokitasvara* (9th Century CE) and a gilt copper-alloy casting of *Tara* (14th Century CE) from Tibet or Nepal and now in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. *Avalokitasvara* is holding a lotus flower. Tara’s left hand shows the *mudra* (gesture) of teaching and her right hand the *mudra* of charity.



In China *Avalokitasvara* evolved into *Guanshiyin* (the Chinese translation of “the one who perceives the sounds of the world”) or *Guanyin* (pinyin; Kuan Yin in the Wade-Giles romanization). In Japan *Guanyin* became Kannon, re-assuming a male identity. The illustrations below shows a painted wooden carving of Guanyin (circa 1100 CE) in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas, and a colossal statue of Guanyin (2015) in the Tsz Shan Monastery in Hong Kong.



The Jesuits first arrived in China in the 16th Century. Christian concepts soon became part of life and culture in Southern China. One particular effect was the syncretism (from Greek *syn* together and *krassis* mixture) of *Guanyin* and the Virgin Mary (Paul, 1983; Reis-Habito, 1993). The illustration below from Pham (2021) shows two ivory carvings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: a European representation of Mary (13th Century) and a Chinese representation of Guanyin (16th Century).



The Eternal Feminine

With the Scientific Revolution and the Age of the Enlightenment, reason began to exert itself in the affairs of the soul. The existence of God was either denied, or considered only in the abstract. However, cold reason could not handle the emotions, which came to the fore in the Romantic Movement. Feminine forces were the means to handle feelings.

At the end of Goethe's *Faust Part II* (1831), Faust, who had sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve knowledge and power, is saved from damnation by the intercession of female heavenly powers. Their final chorus in the play celebrates the power of the "Eternal Feminine."

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche
Hier wird's Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche

All that has happened
Is only a parable;
The insufficient
Is now fulfilled;
The indescribable

Hier ist's getan;
Das Ewig-Weibliche
Zieht uns hinan.

Is now realized;
The Eternal Feminine
Leads us upward.

The chorus has been set to music by Schumann in his Scenes from Goethe's Faust (1853), Liszt in his Faust Symphony (1880) and by Mahler in his Symphony No 8 (1910). The following is the Mahler version:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/9-12-Mahler_-Symphony-8-In-E-Flat.m4a

Theosophy



From 1875 to the middle of the 20th Century the Theosophical Movement exerted an uneasy influence on our thinking. Under

the initial direction of Helena Blavatsky (1831 -1891), the movement combined Western esotericism and spiritualism with Eastern religious thought, and added a dash of charlatanism. Theosophy did promote of peace in a world enamoured of war and it did increase Western understanding of Eastern spiritual ideas. However, it ultimately foundered on its own fakery. The illustration on the right shows a painting of *The Mother of the World* (1937) by the Theosophist painter and explorer Nicholas Roerich.

The Gaia Hypothesis

In the 1970s, studies of how the Earth's atmosphere constantly maintained parameters of temperature and pH that were optimum for the continuation of life led to the Gaia hypothesis, named after the Greek Goddess of the Earth, the primordial mother of all life:

the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate. The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis we are calling the 'Gaia' hypothesis (Lovelock and Margulis, 1974)

According to the Gaia hypothesis, human life is just a component of a larger self-regulating organism, the planetary biosphere. Some are skeptical of this hypothesis, claiming it describes the Earth's process as determined by its future ends – teleological – rather than by its antecedent causes – mechanistic. However, just because science does not easily accommodate purpose does not mean that there is no underlying purpose to the universe.

The Gaia hypothesis has gained much recent support from the modern environmental movement. In some sense humanity has become a cancer on the life of the planet. Unchecked climate change threatens the homeostasis of the world and the life of

everyone.

Feminist Theology

During the past few decades, feminist philosophers have challenged the androcentricity of the Christianity and Judaism (Anderson, 1998; Christ, 2003; Goldenberg, 1979; Johnson, 1984, 1992). These thinkers have pointed out the unfairness and inappropriateness of restricting the priesthood to men. And they have criticized mainstream theology for its focus on logic at the expense of intuition. One cannot prove the existence of God, but one can feel it.

Many people handle the unknowns of life by believing in the ethical instructions and the explanatory narratives that are available in religion. Science does not teach us what to do and does not always get us through the night. By providing a purpose to life and by promising ways to approach suffering and death, religion can help. Feminist religion – “theology” (Goldenberg, 1979) with its stress on grace and compassion promises to be far more effective than present mainstream theology.

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