

Rel. 295A

# Gods in Transit: How Religions Spread

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Fall 2002, Washington and Lee University  
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## Course Description:

This course looks at how deities, cults, ideas, and practices spread from one place to another as part of a growing empire, a network of holy men, or a circuit of traders. Examples will be drawn from the Mediterranean and from Asia, including Hellenistic cults, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The aim is to identify and analyze (a) the processes that occur when religion travel from one region to another, and (b) the role of these religions in creating new cultures shared across a wide area. The focus is mainly on pre-modern contexts, but comparisons will be made, especially toward the end of the course, with religious pluralism and globalization in the modern world. Attention will be given to conceptual tools such as 'syncretism', 'folk traditions' vs. 'high traditions', 'orthodoxy' vs. 'sect', and the formation of canon.

## Course Requirements:

- i. Prepared attendance in class meetings. Each student should come to class with written observations or questions for discussion. These will be turned in and, together with actual contributions to discussion, will cumulatively amount to 20% of final grade.
- ii. Two ca. 1000-word essays based on readings and discussion (20% each).
- iii. An in-class midterm exam (20% of final grade).
- iv. A one-hour final exam (20% of final grade).

## Books for Purchase:

Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (Saint Martin's Press, 1999).  
Antonia Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman age* (Eerdmans, 2002).  
Richard Valantasis, ed., *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* (Princeton UP, 2000).  
Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford UP, 1959).

\* Other readings (marked with an asterisk) will be made available as the term progresses.

## Tentative Class Schedule (subject to revision as the term progresses)

### Introduction

9-5 Merchants, soldiers, and monks: Taking religion on the road

### Week 1 Mystery Cults and Hellenistic Religious Philosophies

9-10 Tripolitis, ch. I.A-B;  
\* Koester, pp. 1-16, 31-36, 164-203, (Historical Survey; The Development of Greek Religion; The New Religions);

RLA, ch. 32 (An Isis Aretology).

- 9-12 Tripolitis, ch. I.C;  
RLA, chs. 2 (Philostratus' Life of Apollonius), 3 (Porphyry's Life of Plotinus), 44  
(Iamblichus, *de Mysteriis*)

## **Week 2 Mithraism and Zoroastrianism**

- 9-17 Foltz, chs. 1-2;  
Tripolitis, ch. II;  
\* Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion*, pp. 35-64, 71-72, 150-158
- 9-19 RLA, ch. 24 (Mithras Liturgy and *Sepher ha-Razim*).

## **Week 3 Hellenistic Judaism**

- 9-24 Tripolitis, ch. III;  
\* Cansdale 1998;  
RLA, ch. 36 (4 Maccabees).
- 9-26 \* Lubin 2002;  
RLA, chs. 9 (Talmud), 26 (Seal of the Merkevah)

## **Week 4 Early Christianity in the Late Antique World**

- 10-1 Tripolitis, ch. IV.
- 10-3 RLA, chs. 15 (Acts of Thomas), 19-20 (Chrysostom), 28 (Amulets), 39 (Christian Oracle Shrines).

## **Week 5 Gnosticism**

- 10-8 Tripolitis, ch. V-VI;  
\* *Gnostic Gospels*.
- 10-10 **Reading Day (No Class Meeting)**  
**FIRST ESSAY DUE SUNDAY by 6pm** (in my mailbox)

## **Week 6 Nestorianism and Manichaeism**

- 10-15 Foltz, ch. 4;  
\* Lieu 1998;  
RLA, chs. 12 (Cologne Mani Codex), 43 (Theology).
- 10-17 RLA, chs. 8 (Asceticism), 25 (Liturgy).

## **Week 7 Islam on the Silk Road**

- 10-22 Foltz, chs. 5-7;  
\* *Qur'an* 1 (al-Fatiha), 2 (The Cow), 5 (The Spread Table), 30 (The Romans).

10-24 **MIDTERM EXAMINATION**

**Week 8 Religions in Ancient India and the Mauryan Age**

- 10-29 \* Lubin, "Vedic Religion and Its Transformations";  
\* *Upanishads*.

- 10-31 \* *Life of the Buddha*;  
\* *Edicts of Asoka*.

**Week 9 The New Brahmanism, Initiatory Sects, and the Royal Courts**

- 11-5 \* Lubin, "Arya Society and the Dharma of the Brahmins";  
\* *The Atharvashiras-Upanishad*.

- 11-7 \* Lubin, "Kings and Gods: State-Sponsored Temple Traditions";  
\* excerpts from the *Puranas*.

**Week 10 The Indianization of Southeast Asia**

- 11-12 \* Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, chs. 2-4.

- 11-14 \* Robinson and Johnson, "Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia";  
\* *Mahavamsa (Chronicle of Lanka)* 1.12-43, 11-13, 24-25.

**Week 11 Buddhism on the Silk Road / Chinese Culture**

- 11-19 Foltz, ch. 3;  
\* *The Questions of King Milinda*.

- 11-21 Wright, ch. 1;  
\* *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ch. 9.

**SECOND ESSAY DUE IN CLASS**

**Thanksgiving Recess**

**Week 12 Buddhism Comes to China**

- 12-3 Wright, chs. 2-4;  
\* *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ch. 15.

- 12-5 Wright, chs. 5-6;  
\* *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ch. 17.

**FINAL EXAM**

## Occasional Readings (*more to come*)

Helmut Koester. 1982. *Introduction to the New Testament. Vol. 1. History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, pp. 1-16, 31-36, 164-203. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

William W. Malandra, trans. 1983. *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions*, pp. 35-64, 71-72, 150-158. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Samuel Lieu. 1998. "From Iran to South China: The eastward passage of Manichaeism." *Silk Road Studies II. Worlds of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, ed. by D. Christian and C. Benjamin, pp. 1-22. Brepols.

Lena Cansdale. 1998. "Jews on the Silk Roads." *Silk Road Studies II. Worlds of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, ed. by D. Christian and C. Benjamin, pp. 23-30. Brepols.

Timothy Lubin. 2002. "The Virtuositic Exegesis of the Brahmavadin and the Rabbi." *Numen: International Journal for the History of Religions* 49.4, 33pp.

### Relevant Links:

[Buddhism on the Silk Road](#) - a website of the British Library

[Monks and Merchants](#) - a website of the Asia Society

[Silkroad Foundation](#)

[Silk Road Seattle](#) - a website of the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, Univ. Washington

[Bulletin of the Asia Institute](#) - "studies in the art, archaeology, numismatics, history, and languages of ancient Iran, Mesopotamia, and Central Asia and connections with China and Japan along the Silk Route"

[Journal of Ancient Civilizations](#) - "a forum for the discussion of various aspects of the cultural and historical process in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world, encompassing studies of individual civilizations as well as common elements, contacts and interactions among them"

[Zoroastrianism: An Ancient Religion of Iran and Its Diaspora](#)

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