



**Hum101**

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The Silk Road was established in the Han Dynasty in 130 BCE to expand trading channels with different regions and increase economic gains which later on turned into a huge merchant network with routes connecting Eurasia and North Africa that opened the door for the spread of universal religions like Islam and Buddhism through these routes facilitated by cultural exchange, economical networks and the influence of political establishments. Additionally, political establishments such as the Mongols and Kushan empires focused on political moves in order to be more involved in the Silk Road trading and gain more capital. For instance, Mongols spanned from Eastern Europe to East Asia which were some major trading regions of the Silk Road it was a doorway for the Mongols to capture more resources through the Silk Road which is why they remained open to different cultures and religions facilitating the spread of Islam and Buddhism. Furthermore, the formation of trade networks in the Indian Ocean called maritime routes added another dimension to the interconnectedness of different regions of the world which helped spread Islam from Arabia all the way to the Indian subcontinent. The Indian Ocean developed as a major trading route, linking East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and East Asia facilitating commerce and cultural exchange. This maritime route contributed to the spread of religions through trade networks in these different regions. *This essay aims to analyze the merchant networks of the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean maritime routes along with the political landscapes that influenced the trade networks established by trans-continental political establishments such as the Mongols to identify the impact of these different aspects on the spread of universal religions like Buddhism and Islam through illustrating the interconnectedness of trade, politics, and religions. It will then conclude by presenting two aspects of the universal religion's impact which are creating common cultures and world divides. Firstly, it will focus on the emergence of the trade networks along the Silk Road and how those*

*merchant networks facilitated the spread of religions like Buddhism and Islam. Furthermore, it will discuss some political moves taken by the Mongols, Kushan Empire, and Mauryan rulers in different regions that changed the dynamics of trade networks and facilitated the spread of universal religions. Lastly, it will illustrate the flow of how merchant networks in the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean connected different regions and facilitated Islam and Buddhism.*

The Silk Road established a vast merchant network through trading routes that facilitated the spread of the universal religion of Buddhism and Islam. The Silk Roads linked places with different landscapes, like deserts and fertile lands, from Central Asia to China and the Mediterranean. Moreover, there were regions along the Silk Road that had natural resources like the silk of China and horses of Central Asia that were in demand from places far away (Frankopan, 2017). Later when China started to expand towards the northern territories to enter Central Asia due to the huge demand for silk, the Silk Road was created. Later on, many resources from distant places were shared through trading along the Silk Road (Frankopan, 2017). Eventually, a strong merchant network was established following the demand and supply of various products along the Silk Road. Apart from the merchant networks, the Silk Road facilitated the expansion of the influence of empires through diplomatic relations among different empires to secure trading routes and increase safe commerce for the merchants. Frankopan (2017) stated "China's dealings with Persia became regular and intensive" which illustrates the consistent dependency between the two empires facilitated by trading along the Silk Road which formed relationships among different empires causing cultural exchange. Accordingly, this can be concluded that trade has a direct impact on politics because trading decides the economic power of different nations and to maintain wealth it is important to establish diplomatic relations in order to resolve

conflicts and ensure security. Following that, the transmission of Buddhism along the Silk Road started from India extending to Central Asia, China, and later the world beyond because of some aspects such as traveling monks, trade networks, political movements, the close relationship between Buddhists and traders, and the lasting impact of the faith. According to Gupta (2017), "The Silk Road turned as the springboard of Buddhism to spread it from India to Central Asia". Hence, the Silk Roads served as a way to spread Buddhism from India to Central Asia and later to many other parts of the world through merchants of Buddhist merchants traveling along these routes and interacting with people of different cultures. Kedar (2018) says that Buddhist writings, teachings, and images are commonly carried by traveling monks and traders along the main trade routes. Hence, the merchant network played a crucial role in carrying Buddhist knowledge to other parts of the world. Furthermore, Buddhism spread from Central Asia to other parts of the world such as China. Hansen(1998) says "as the ripples extended to China proper, China became a largely Buddhist empire by the tenth century AD" acknowledging that Buddhism spread to China over several centuries and eventually China became a major center for Buddhism by the tenth century AD. Furthermore, In the Song dynasty when Buddhist monasteries provided loans to merchants, the Buddhist paraphernalia witnessed rapid growth (Kedar, 2018) which demonstrates a positive relationship between the Buddhist and merchant community in China and how it impacted the spread of Buddhism. As Gupta (2017) points out "close relationship between Buddhist communities and merchants made a symbolic union that helped to spread of Buddhist ideas far and far way" showing how the Buddhists and merchant network's union expanded the influence of Buddhism through trade routes. According to Frankopan (2017), trade between China and the world had been difficult due to the negotiation of the Gobi desert and beyond Jade Gate. Despite the risks, merchants traded high-value goods

over long distances which kept the spread of Buddhism going through the Silk Road which underscored the legacy of Buddhism's propagation through the Silk Road. Secondly, the involvement of Muslims in the Silk Road initiated the early exchanges between the Roman and Persian Empires, as well as the rise of important Islamic cities along the trade routes. As these empires had a significant impact on the trade and commerce along the Silk Road, it eventually led to Arabia being involved in the Silk Road. Moreover, Frankopan(2017) said “Rome’s eyes had been fixed on Asia from the moment it transformed itself from a republic into an empire” demonstrating that the Roman Empire was influenced by the eastern part of the world through the Silk Road and he also mentions “For Constantine – and the Roman Empire – had found God” which shows how the silk road spread universal religions like in this case, the Roman Empire adopted Christianity from the eastern regions which demonstrates the pathway for Islam to spread to the eastern side as well because after being involved in the trading networks, many Muslim merchants traveled around the world and Islam spread along the way. Additionally, many Islamic cities along the Silk Road facilitated the spread of Islam. Frankopan (2017) said, “Cities on the north-south axis likewise were transformed, with the most dazzling example at Petra, which became one of the wonders of antiquity thanks to its position on the route between the cities of Arabia and the Mediterranean”. Hence, due to their strategically beneficial position and significant architectural monuments built in trading centers like Palmyra and Petra, these cities became important hubs for trading and became famous among the merchants which helped in the spread of Islam as these cities were very close to Arabia and hence it connected different regions of the world. Moreover, many Islamic cities like Samarkand and Baghdad became important for trade and learning because of scholars residing in these cities and bringing advancements in different fields. Frankopan (2017) says about these cities “Cities such as these

became home to brilliant scholars who advanced the frontiers of their subjects.” which shows the importance of these Islamic cities that eventually led to the propagation of Islamic teachings and practices across different regions connected by the Silk Road. Therefore, the Silk Road served as a pathway for the spread of Islamic ideas, beliefs, and practices, allowing the Islamic faith to reach new countries and populations. After the formation of the Silk Road and the involvement of Muslims in this road due to trading and commerce, apart from traders many missionaries and mystics traveled on these trade routes such as Sufis who convinced the local population to convert to Islam. For example, some Sufis did unusual things like walking around naked except for animal horns to get attention (Frankopan, 2017). Furthermore, as Islam kept on spreading, it created a huge impact on the economy of the world of trading as Frankopan (2017) says “The Islamic conquests created a new world order, an economic giant, bolstered by self-confidence, broad-mindedness, and a passionate zeal for progress” which demonstrates the impact Islam created along the silk road by the exchange of ideas, intellects, goods, and money. This positive impact of Islam causes it to spread even more in vast regions. Hence, the spread of Islam along the Silk Road was an evolving process influenced by trade, cultural exchange, and religious contact. The integrated trade channels promoted the spread of Islamic beliefs and practices to many places, helping to spread the faith and integrate it into different cultures along the Silk Road.

Trans-continental imperial establishments such as the Mongols, Kushan Empire, and Mauryan rulers facilitated the spread of Buddhism and Islam through their political movements which affected trade and commerce resulting in the spread of religion. To begin with, the Mongols played an important role in facilitating Islam and Buddhism across Europe and Asia by imposing different policies, political

strategies, and economic factors. Firstly, the Mongols gave freedom of worship to the people by having tolerance for different religions which encouraged people to freely follow the religion they wanted to believe in. The primary motive for Mongols to establish such flexibility was to attract traders from diverse regions to be involved with the Mongols and to facilitate their trade networks to expand which later on led to facilitating the spread of many religions. Furthermore, according to Frankopan (2017), there were deep ties between the Chinggisids and their Muslim subjects for which Islam became popular among the Mongol rulers resulting in the Islamization of the Mongol Khanates. Hence, political ties and the influence of the rulers had a huge impact on the propagation of religions. Additionally, Chinggis Khan, the former of the empire, used to honor spiritual leaders like Changchun and provide them with special privileges (Frankopan, 2017). Besides, they formed ties with religious figures, such as Tibetan monks like Phags Pa to legitimize their rule. Hence, the emperor's interconnectedness with spiritual leaders facilitated the spread of the Mongol era as this motivated people to adapt to different religions. This policy of Khan was further expanded to include experts from religions like Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity which resulted in a widespread acceptance of these faiths. Due to the freedom of worship in the Mongol era, they achieved political stability and reduced conflicts in the diverse and vast population. People were less likely to go against the rulers if they were given the freedom to follow their religion. Not only that, the diverse religions ensured economic gains and stronger international relations as all kinds of people from different religions were accepted in the Mongol era. Moreover, Mongols ensured to redistribute their wealth in international trade resulting in economic engagements with traders from regions where Islam and Buddhism were prominent. Hence, upon realizing the political gains, the Mongols ensured to be open to different religions which facilitated the spread of Islam and

Tibetan Buddhism even more through many traders and merchants of these religions from around the world. Furthermore, the Mongols integrated Islamic beliefs into their society by allowing a mixture of different ethnicities and intermarriage (Frankopan, 2017). As a result, the ordinary soldiers of the military who worked closely with the local Muslims started to marry them and convert their religions or adopt Islam. Due to the close nature and unity of the military, Islam spread in the military through the influence of some comrades. Additionally, senior military persons had significant influence over the troops which led Islam to spread faster. Moreover, many political motives like those of Ilkhan Gazan to win the support of Muslim segments of the army, had a significant impact on the propagation of Islam in the Mongol era as political figures such as him had a huge impact and influence on the vast population. Lastly, the extensive trade networks in the Mongol era facilitated the spread of Islam. According to Naymada (2023), “During the reign of Ogodei Khan, merchants, especially Muslim merchants, came to the palace, and Ogodei Khan gave them their share of capital” which shows significant interaction between Muslims and the Mongols that led to the establishment of Islam. Additionally, Chinggis Khan had control over the main hubs of the Silk Road which made the Mongol empire connect the West and East (Naymada, 2023). This facilitated the spread of these religions through many regions of the world through Mongols. Moreover, the wife of Kublai Khan was Buddhist Empress Chabi who tirelessly promoted Tibetan Buddhism in the Mongol Empire, especially in China during the Yuan Dynasty (Naymada, 2023). Her influence and advocacy of Buddhism contributed to the rise of Tibetan Buddhism as a significant religious tradition. Hence, after Islam and Buddhism were spread by the Mongols, these faiths easily propagated across Eurasia through the Silk Road. Furthermore, under the rule of Kushan, in the Gandhara region, there was a mixture of different cultural elements such as artistic and religious expressions of



Greek, India, and Iran known as Kushan Gandhara synthesis (Foltz, 2010). This synthesis was led by the cultural exchange of regions through the Silk Road and this helped to propagate Buddhism in the cultures involved in this synthesis. Additionally, the Kushan Kings influenced the religion to spread across its vast population through the use of architecture. According to Foltz (2010), “Kanishka II, who helped the spread of Buddhism through the building of viharas (monasteries) and stupas (temples to house relics).” The reason behind the Kushan empire rulers building Buddhist architects was that there were many merchants and people in commerce who followed Buddha and this was a political move in favor of the kings despite being Hindus they spent on making Buddhist temples which facilitated the spread of Buddhism even more. Similarly, a Mauryan ruler’s influence on the religion Buddhism resulted in a mass population adapting to it. Gupta (2017) mentioned, “Mauryan ruler king Asoka put effort to fast transmission of Buddhism in Asia around third century BCE” which shows that rulers of empires like King Asoka’s conversion and promotion of Buddhism influenced a vast population to adopt this religion. His adaptation helped Buddhism to spread even beyond India in Asia as it gained widespread acceptance. Gupta (2017) said “after him in Southeast Asia and East Asia use Buddhist policies” which shows the influence of King Asoka and how this political entity impacted vast regions. Thus, the influence of political establishments like King Ashok enhanced the spread of Buddhism and cultural exchange among different nationals. Summing up, the influence of political establishments created huge impacts on wide areas of people by impacting trade, commerce, and cultural exchange which facilitated the spread of universal religions.

Maritime routes such as the Indian Ocean facilitated the spread of Islam and Buddhism over time through trade, polity, and cultural exchanges. Gilbert (2002)

said, “Economic and political developments in turn triggered large-scale movements of people within the region. The commercial and imperial structures that lent the region its coherence collapsed”. To elaborate, when commercial and imperial structures fell apart, the changes in the economy and politics in the Indian Ocean region caused a lot of people to move around. People came to the Indian Ocean region for various reasons like trade chances, money, or because things were unstable where they were before. Trade, business, and people moving around were all connected and affected the culture, politics, and economy in the region. Initially, the Indian Ocean trading system involved coastal trading among local communities residing in coastal areas along the maritime routes which over time converted into a massive international trading network. The emergence of the spread of Islam along the maritime route started after conquering Egypt and Persia during the three decades after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, from the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea, the Gulf, and the Arabian Sea coasts (Alpers, 2014). Hence, the military invasion by the Muslim soldiers, not only helped to establish Islam in these above-mentioned coastal areas but also paved the way to spreading Islam through trade networks. Furthermore, Islam spread to Africa when Muslim traders started to go to places such as Kilwa, and Mombasa in search of gold and started to settle in the coastal area. Cities like Kilwa became economically powerful because of the trade of gold which attracted traders from around the world. Alpers (2014) mentions that when Ibn Battuta visited the Swahili coast, he saw the economic significance of Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa due to its gold, ivory, and bonded labor. Eventually, Muslim traders were drawn to Africa and spread Islam by connecting this region to the Indian Ocean merchant network. Afterward, the Persian and Arab traders visited distant places such as the coast of southwest India and Sri Lanka due to the rich trading opportunities. Alpers mentioned that (2014) “Isolated Persian and Arab traders had certainly visited the coast of southwestern

India and Sri Lanka from the early decades of the rise of Islam". Later on, the Persian and Arab communities continued the exchange of goods, ideas, and beliefs through economic expansion of trading. These early connections of trade networks later laid the foundation for cultural exchange in other parts of the world. Additionally, as a result of India's sophisticated infrastructure including ports like Calicut, Quilon, and Cambay that served as essential hubs for maritime trade in the Indian Ocean, Arab traders realized the country's strategic and infrastructural value for commerce which is why they started to move here and religion spread along the process. Later on, some of these traders settled in the coastal areas of India and Sri Lanka through intermarriage. As a result, the merchant networks established practices of Islam and promoted the religion in these regions. When Arabs married lower cast Hindu Malibars and settled in these regions, the intermix of the cultures led to the formation of Muslim communities such as Mappilas. Alpher (2014) said that Islam spread on the coasts of Malabar in the 13th century when Arab traders also introduced Sunni Shafi Islam which acted as a religious and legal framework for trading along western Indian Ocean coasts emerging Muslim communities known as "Pardeshis" and "Mappilas". Hence, these different Muslim communities emerged due to the influence of arab traders introducing Sunni Shafi Islam. Overall, the spread of Islam in southwestern India, particularly in Malabar, was facilitated by Arab traders through trade networks that led to cultural exchange forming unique Muslim communities by introducing Muslim practices into the society. Subsequently, Islam spread from Malabar to other regions such as Hindu Gujrat through the economic and political relations of the Muslims with the Hindu hosts of Gujrat. Alpers (2014) mentioned that Muslim traders grew in power through commerce and partnerships with regional leaders such as the Zamorin of Calicut. These political ties helped the Muslims gain an influence over different communities of India which spread Islam onwards from there. Evidently, there

existed different communities under the same religion and it created world divides and conflicts as their adaptation to Islam with an existing belief system and the circumstances of different communities in different geographical areas resulted in different beliefs under the same religion. For instance, the Islam in Arabia, Persia would be much different from the Islam adaptation of Indian and Srilankan communities. Moreover, the different communities created in India like "Pardeshis", "Mappilas" and the Islam minority of Gujrat formed divisions and diversities due to their unique environments. Moreover, Islam began to spread to Southeast Asia in the 13th century as there were scattered Muslim merchants already operating in the region (Alphers, 2014). These scattered merchants served as an early conduit for Islam in this region. Additionally, Southeast Asia was connected to Indian Ocean maritime trade routes which engaged this region with merchants of the Persian Gulf and arab facilitating the spread of Islam. Moreover, political figures such as the Abbasid Caliphate had a significant role in facilitating trade engagements and the spread of Islam with regions around the Indian Ocean as he was a central authority with influence over a vast population with different regions along the maritime route. Alphers (2014) mentioned, "Under the Abbasid dynasty, which ruled from Baghdad from 750 to 1258, a new era of political stability—..dominated the western Indian Ocean world." Eventually, the western Indian Ocean world adopted Islam as their religion and language. Overall, more political movements such as the invasion of North Africa and Persia by the Arabs initiated trading in the maritime routes in these regions and spread Islam. Hence, the trade networks directly and indirectly facilitated Islam through interconnections of different cultures around the world. Furthermore, the interconnected trade networks in the Indian Ocean facilitated the propagation of Buddhism as well. According to Alphers (2014), "From its roots in the Ganges plain of northern India, Buddhism eventually spread to Sri Lanka" which shows that Buddhism spread

from India to Sri Lanka through missionary activities and trade networks over time. Later from Sri Lanka, it spread to South and Southeast Asia. The journey of the royal Kashmiri monk Gunavarman, who traveled from Sri Lanka to Java in the early 420s mentioned by Alpers (2014) signifies the movements of Buddhist ideas across the Indian Ocean between South and Southeast Asia along the maritime trade routes through missionary activities. Srilanka acted as the hub of missionary activities that spread Buddhism along the coastal areas of India and the Bay of Bengal. Afterward, it spread to China facilitated by these maritime trade routes and the Buddhist monk travelers from India and Srilanka to spread Buddhist practice across those regions. Additionally, In East Asia, the only channel for places like Japan and Korea to facilitate trading with Buddhist hub China was through the maritime route which facilitated the spread of Buddhism to these places. Hence, maritime routes of the Indian Ocean facilitated the spread of Buddhism and Islam through trade networks, political entities, and their influence and cultural exchanges.

In conclusion, the Indian Ocean, Silk Road routes, and political empires facilitated cultural exchange and the spread of religious beliefs across diverse regions. The spread of universal religions like Buddhism and Islam played an important role in creating common cultures throughout Afro-Eurasia by bringing more similarities between people when they started to follow similar lifestyles under the same beliefs. These religions facilitated shared principles, and cross-cultural communications among different regions resulting in the blending of the same customs and belief systems. However, the spread of these religions triggered new world divides as well. Due to the mix of existing beliefs in different regions, there were different and distinct identities created in different places under the name of the same religion which created conflicts between people within the same religion

like the Mappilas and Pardesis who are two different communities under the same religion. In another case, Frankopan (2017) mentions the Ilkhanid and Timurid art and says “we find visual representations of Muhammad (and other prophets). In these renderings, Muhammad is placed in Buddhist or Christian models.” highlighting how Muhammad was depicted in different styles in these different artworks creating confusion and diversity for the followers. Hence, even though these religions created common cultures, they also triggered world divides by creating different interpretations of the religions as they are mixed up with existing beliefs of different regions of the world. In essence, a key feature of human history has been the interconnectedness of trade, politics, and religion which formed civilization and established unity and variety.

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