

Imperial Reliance

A Comparative Missiological Consideration of Emperor Figures and Missionaries in Christianity and Buddhism

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Abstract

The institution of formal empire is not limited to studies of the past, but shows itself as a present possibility. This article employs the new discipline of comparative missiology to examine the relationship between missionary religions and empire. As Buddhism and Christianity parallel one another as two global religions that have spread beyond their communities of origin due to the sending of proselytisers or missionaries, they have relied on the frameworks, features, and power dynamics of empire, whether intentionally or not. Early in their respective histories, each tradition had an emperor who converted to the faith and then promoted the religion by patronising missionaries. This dynamic continues in the example of the propulsion of the figure of the 14th Dalai Lama onto the world stage. The historical examples in both the ancient and recent past serve to demonstrate the reliance of the missionary endeavours on empire for the spread of their respective religions.

Key words: comparative missiology, empire, Constantine, Ashoka, Erik Prince, Donald Trump, Dalai Lama, Xi Jinping

1. Introduction

The title of Bronwen McShea's recent monograph, *Apostles of Empire: The Jesuits and New France* (2019) reflects the current academic approach toward the history of Christian missions. Although the priests of the Society of Jesus are known for their engaging and accommodating religious aspects of other religions, such as the Rites Controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in China (Bosch, 2011:460), McShea casts them as agents of European empire, in this case, the French empire. In presenting the Jesuit missionary, Paul Le Jeune (1591-1664), she writes that he “was a leader not only of efforts to bring Native American populations into the Catholic fold, but also of a worldly enterprise of building up a French Atlantic empire” (McShea, 2019:4). Leading up to such a view, Melanie McAlister

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describes how twentieth century scholarship began to regard Christian missionaries as working on behalf of empire:

[I]t was becoming more common for Americans to view missionaries as agents of imperialism – either directly, when they served as the advance guard of imperial power, or indirectly, as cultural imperialists who were certain of their own superiority. Protestant missionaries, particularly those from the mainline denominations, had themselves been raising questions about their own role in undermining local cultures and enabling the expansion of U.S. or European power since the early part of the century . . . Historians in recent years have complicated this picture, portraying missionaries, including evangelicals, as both agents and critics of imperialism. In fact, often they were neither, operating at oblique angles to state power, with their own interests and agendas (McAlister, 2018:21).³

Regarding the global dispersion of missionaries, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, during this era of European expansion, roughly 1450-1950 C.E., Christian historian Stephen Neill reports, “It is now widely taken for granted that, whatever may have been the beneficent intentions of the missionaries, they were in fact the tools of governments, and that missions can be classed as one of the instruments of western infiltration and control” (Neill, 1966:11-12). More recently, the 2018 death of the twenty-six year old John Allen Chau (1991-2018), the American who died attempting to engage the isolated people of North Sentinel Island, raised the charge of his acting out a modern day imperialism.⁴

Even if the majority of Christian missionaries have not actively sought to work on behalf and extend the boundaries of empire, there is a precedent for a reliance on the framework, technology, and force of empire from the earliest days of the Christian missionary movement. The book of Acts presents the apostle Paul in the mid-first century C.E. as a church planter of Jewish ethnic background who used his Roman citizenship to travel the roads and shipping routes of the Roman Empire with the goal of starting or pastoring congregations. Many of Paul's Epistles have as their titles, the names of the cities from the Roman Empire: *Corinthians*, *Thesalonians*, *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, and *Colossians*, and, of course, *Romans*. He

³ Two other recent works that critically examine the relationship between American missionaries and U.S. foreign policy are Emily Conroy-Krutz (2015), *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), and Matthew Avery Sutton, *Double Crossed: The Missionaries Who Spied for the United States During the Second World War* (New York: Basic Books).

⁴ Tim Sohn. (2018). Inside the Story of John Allen Chau's Ill-Fated Trip to a Remote Island: Questions Abound about the Ethics of the Missionary's Trip and What Will Happen Next. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/inside-story-john-allen-chaus-ill-fated-trip-remote-island-180970971/> (Accessed September 10, 2019).

traveled to these cities both by Roman road and aboard ships. While not usually considered a sea-faring people, such as the Phoenicians, sociologist Rodney Stark describes the nautical character of the Roman Empire as being “mainly a waterfront empire surrounding the Mediterranean Sea” (Stark, 2006:74). He contrasts this body of water with the grandeur of oceans, as he describes, “Almost a lake, the Mediterranean has very weak tides, is sheltered from storms, and lacks the off-shore distances that make sailing far more dangerous on the great oceans” (Stark, 2006:75). Such a setting prompted the technological development of the ships used for trade and transport:

The sailing ships used in this era were quite reliable, capacious, and much faster than any form of land transportation. During favorable weather, large grain transports from Egypt could make the voyage to Rome in less than three weeks. In addition, sailing routes often were much shorter than the best land routes, and they confronted neither hill nor dale. For these reasons, most long-distance travelers went by sea whenever they could, and many of them took their gods with them . . . These travelers were not missionaries; they spread their gods mainly by example (Stark, 2006:74-75).

Stark argues that trade and travel helped in the spread of religion, but unlike those whose religion unintentionally spread with their migration, Paul purposely functioned as a missionary of the new Christian faith, and proactively utilised the shipping system to carry out his work. Throughout his career, he never offered the imperial powers his ultimate allegiance, however, according to tradition, died a martyr's death outside the city of Rome under the persecution of Nero, possibly around the year 64 C.E.⁵ As a whole, Paul's interaction with the Roman Empire demonstrates how a constellation of the economic, technological, and political features of empire intersect with the missionary's work, either assisting directly or indirectly the missionary's undertaking. The question can be asked, then, whether this relationship between mission and empire is restricted to the Christian tradition, or if the same dynamic occurs in other religions.

Before engaging in the practice of comparative missiology to explore the relationship between religious mission and imperial power, we will look at why this matter holds pertinence for the present day.

2. A Proposal for Empire

Pursuing this question of the relationship between missionary religions and empire in these opening decades of the twenty-first century, formal empire might ap-

⁵ See Edwin (2014:23). For a discussion on dating Paul's death, see Wright (2018:391-397).

pear as a vestige of the past. The present vigour of the postcolonial critique spread throughout many academic disciplines conveys, in its name, that both the approach and context are “post,” meaning that the present study takes place in a time period after something, which is now past or gone. Having very few actual colonies remaining in the world implies that the empires built through a colonial structure are now subjects of study to be deconstructed and evaluated. While one could argue that empire never went away, but just changed its name such as to American “hegemony,”⁶ there are indications that formal empire could return in the near future. One strong signifier, and possible harbinger, of the return of formal empire appeared in 2017. Erik Prince (b. 1969) publicly made the case during both to the American President Donald Trump and aimed at the American public for a feature of outright imperialism. Prince is the brother of Cabinet member Betsy DeVos (b. 1958), the Secretary of Education for the Trump administration. However, he is best known as the founder of Blackwater, the private mercenary company relied upon by the U.S. government in the first years of the Iraq War. Mike Kuhlenbeck summarises Prince’s rise to prominence:

Following in his father’s footsteps, Erik Prince became a US Navy SEAL and earned the rank of lieutenant. Prince founded Blackwater in 1997, serving as the company’s CEO in 2009 and as chairman in 2010 before finally selling the enterprise that year. When Blackwater changed its name to Xe Services in 2009 and then to Academi two years later, it was assumed to be in response to the bad publicity and public outcry against company practices during Prince’s time at the helm. Courtesy of the election of born-again Christian George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, Prince’s company would reap the benefits of Bush-era policies (Kuhlenbeck, 2018).

Since the time of his emergence in the Iraq War, Prince has continued to be a figure of controversy, including having accusations that he lied to a congressional committee regarding a meeting with Russian representatives prior to Trump’s inauguration (Hutzler, 2019). In 2017, Prince appeared on television⁷ and published an opinion column in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he publicly pressed the President to appoint a viceroy to finish up the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, ending America’s longest war. (Prince, 2017) The first step that Prince advises is for Trump to “con-

⁶ Niall Ferguson reports that, regarding the U.S., “by far the most popular term among writers on international relations remains hegemon,” which is a nation’s position of global leadership to enforce particular economic and political values through military superiority and financial persuasion. Compare Ferguson (2004:12).

⁷ CBS News. (2017). Blackwater Founder Erik Prince Proposes Privatizing Afghanistan War. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blackwater-founder-erik-prince-privatize-afghanistan-war-contractors/> (Accessed July 7, 2019).

solidate authority in Afghanistan with one person: an American viceroy” (Prince, 2017). Implicit in Prince’s proposal is that Prince himself would be the qualified leader to take up such a post. This individual “would lead all U.S. government and coalition efforts – including command, budget, policy, promotion and contracting,” and, like a viceroy or proconsul, would “report directly to the president” (Prince, 2017). One great benefit of this plan, according to Prince, is to cost-effectively end the war. He argues, “In Afghanistan, the viceroy approach would reduce rampant fraud by focusing spending on initiatives that further the central strategy, rather than handing cash to every outstretched hand from a U.S. system bereft of institutional memory” (Prince, 2017). Another stated role for this post is having the authority to wage war with decision-making taking place on site, allowing for the emerging Afghan government to gain stability:

Second, Mr. Trump should authorize his viceroy to set rules of engagement in collaboration with the elected Afghan government to make better decisions faster. Troops fighting for their lives should not have to ask a lawyer sitting in air conditioning 500 miles away for permission to drop a bomb. Our plodding, hand wringing and overcaution have prolonged the war – and the suffering it bears upon the Afghan population. Give the leadership on the ground the authority and responsibility to finish the job (Prince, 2017).

Through his transformation of warfare with Blackwater, Prince has, in his career, affected and continues to influence global events. He has not only functioned as an agent or leader of empire in Iraq, but is pushing to become a viceroy of American rule over another country. Although Prince’s plan offers the strategy on how the U.S. can exit from Afghanistan, it is interesting that he uses the choice of “viceroy.” Jürgen Osterhammel offers a definition of the term as historically employed:

The most important functional position mediating between the ruler and his commoner subjects is the viceroy, loosely defined as the head of the political hierarchy in a given territorial unit at the periphery. . . . He was always a peripheral autocrat, possessing virtually unchallenged authority (Osterhammel, 2014:19-20).

Osterhammel qualifies the term by setting it necessarily within an imperial structure by stating, “Without a king or emperor at home there could, of course, be no ‘vice-roy’” (Osterhammel, 2014:20). Not only does Prince use the language of empire to make his case, but also points to the East India Company (EIC) as an example to follow for corporate efficiency. However, the EIC went from unofficial to official empire when taken over in full by the British government with the Government of India Act in 1858. The fact that Prince pushes to have a position of viceroy over

Afghanistan demonstrates that empire is a real, current possibility, and not just a past institution.

3. Imperial Presidencies

Prince is not the only actor operating in imperial mode, but fits into the current trend of political leadership. Donald Trump appeals to many Americans, including evangelical Christians, because of his brash and even autocratic manner. In this current decade, he shares the global stage with two other presidents who have not only shown themselves to be authoritarian in their own countries, but have also set themselves up for lifelong rule. In succeeding Yeltsin as President of the Russian Federation in 2000, Vladimir Putin began erasing his predecessor's legacy since, according to Steven Lee Myers, "Popular will, in Putin's view, was the road to chaos" (Myers, 2015:262). President Putin's rule eroded the democratic freedoms in exchange for a sense of stability after a volatile decade. In the intervening years, including a stint as Prime Minister due to constitutional term limits, he maneuvered to set himself up as the Russian president for life. Considering Putin's style and performance as the Russian leader, *The Economist* assesses, "The kind of rule Mr. Putin has gradually fashioned over his years in power has more in common with a tsar than with a Soviet politburo chief, let alone a democratically elected leader."⁸

Similarly, the current Chinese President Xi Jinping was able to eliminate term limits, allowing him to lead both the Chinese Communist Party and, in turn, the People's Republic of China, indefinitely. Willy Lan, a professor in Hong Kong, was quoted saying, "Xi Jinping now has an institutional guarantee of support. He can be emperor for life – staying in power as long as his health allows" (Jiang & Hunt, 2017). Trump's public affinity for authoritarian rulers, including Kim Jong Un of North Korea, has raised the concern that he would like to follow his Russian and Chinese counterpart to get rid of term limits:

One difference between Putin and Xi in their maneuverings and that of Trump is that the Russian and Chinese presidents have found success... Comedian and political commentator Bill Maher warned voters days before the 2016 presidential election, "Once fascists get power, they don't give it up. You've got President Trump for life" (Romano, 2016).

Trump regularly jokes about staying in power longer than the Constitution allows. Christian right leader Jerry Falwell, Jr., the current president and son of the founder of Liberty University, suggested publicly that Trump should enjoy an extra two years to his

⁸ "Enter Tsar Vladimir," *The Economist*, October 28th-November 3rd 2017, 23.

term to make up for federal investigation into his election (Bertrand & Samuelsohn, 2019). This encouragement from a Christian leader to abandon the American Constitution and the rule of law is an alarming indicator of the possibility of the transformation of the presidency to a lifelong ruler, which can effectively become an emperor.

Both as a candidate and as president, Donald Trump has presented himself as a protector of Christians both in the U.S. and abroad. During the 2016 campaign, candidate Trump often called on Christians “to quit being the ‘silent’ majority and stand up for their beliefs” (Schlafly, Martin and Decker, 2016:93). When asked how evangelicals could continue to support when allegations of his adulterous relationship with a pornographic actress became public, Tony Perkins told *Politico* that Christians “were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there’s somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully” (Stanton, 2018). Regarding Christians overseas, Trump “is also outspoken on the need to defend Christians in Muslim countries, and other countries where they are being persecuted” (Schlafly et al., 2016:93). In one of the Republican debates, Trump spoke as a defender of Christians abroad, warning what he would do to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other Islamic terrorists:

“You look at the Middle East, they’re chopping off heads, they’re chopping off the heads of Christians and anybody else that happens to be in the way, they’re drowning people in steel cages, and now we’re talking about waterboarding... It’s fine, and if we want to go stronger, I’d go stronger too. Because frankly, that’s the way I feel. Can you imagine these people, these animals, over in the Middle East that chop off heads, sitting around talking and seeing that we’re having a hard problem with waterboarding? We should go for waterboarding and we should go tougher than waterboarding” (Berenson, 2016).

In speaking this way of concern for the plight of Christians overseas, and in his promises to promote the interests of evangelicals in the U.S., Trump appears to fashion for himself a role like that of Constantine. Before becoming sole emperor of the Roman Empire, he witnessed persecutions against the Christian community in 302-303 C.E. under Diocletian and his Caesar Galerius, to whom Kenneth Scott Latourette attributes by “far the most serious and determined persecution” (Latourette, 1970:172). After ascending to the position of co-emperor, Constantine gave the religion legal status in the empire in 313. However, rather than equating Trump with Constantine, evangelicals have connected him to a different emperor – Cyrus from the book of Ezra. Daniel Bock explains how this imperial moniker was originally bestowed upon Trump not by an evangelical Christian but by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Bock, 2018). By casting him in the role of Cyrus, evangelicals are able to look past Trump’s moral failings. Roger Olson explains why this group of the electorate who claim to

be devout finds such a strong affinity with a president who does not attend church regularly, lies daily to the public, and is a thrice-married adulterer:

[M]any evangelical Trump-supporters who call him “our Cyrus” *mean* that, even though he is not a Christian and his character is highly questionable, he is a pagan raised up by God to deliver and defend American Christians and “Christian America” from the secular and even anti-Christian political “left” that is determined to criminalize true, real, authentic Christianity (as they believe is already happening in some European countries and in Canada). Their hope and belief is that Trump will appoint federal judges and Supreme Court judges who will “undo” *Roe v Wade* and gay marriage and free Christians (and others) to refuse to do business with gays (Olson, 2018).

This role of champion of evangelicals has also crossed over to missionary support. Rev. Andrew Brunson is an American missionary with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church denomination who had lived in Turkey for two decades prior to being imprisoned by that government for two years. The Turkish government charged him as a spy working supporting a militant Islamic group in its attempt to overthrow the state. As a news article from *Time* magazine relays, Trump’s economic pressure on Turkey helped secure Brunson’s release and return to the U.S.:

He was discharged not because the “Turkish justice system” deemed him innocent but rather because the Turks were afraid that Trump would unleash another series of tweets that could undermine the Turkish lira and contribute to an already galloping inflation. Turkey is at the beginning of a deep recession that risks undermining the very foundations of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s economic edifice and possibly his electoral coalition (Barkey, 2019).

This instance of using the economic power of his position to secure the release of an American citizen falls in line with the work of the American presidency. In this case, however, Trump casts himself as the protector of an evangelical Christian missionary, embodying that mode of Cyrus or Constantine as the imperial protector. The exploration below will demonstrate that the support of autocratic or imperial power is not merely limited to the history of Christian missions as a comparative missiological examination distills similarities among religions in their propagation.

4. Comparative Missiology

The discipline of missiology is most commonly understood to be the study of the spread and transmission of the Christian faith.⁹ While it has long been recognised

⁹ Stanley Skreslet defines missiology as a field that “encompasses every kind of scholarly inquiry performed on the subject of mission without necessarily subordinating any group of studies to any other” (Skreslet, 2012:15).

that religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, share many historical connections and parallel elements, Stanley Skreslet reports that “relatively few missiologists have applied themselves to the problem of comparative missiology” (Skreslet, 2012:132). As a parallel or sub-discipline of the field of comparative religion, comparative missiology is in its infancy. At present, Aaron Ghiloni’s *World Religions and Their Missions* serves as a foundational work for the emerging field of comparative missiology (Ghiloni, 2015). This new field of study goes beyond the Christian tradition to identify the similarities and mark the contrasts between the ways that different religious traditions spread, which Ghiloni posits as self-evident in the global array of religions:

The notion that mission is predominantly the promulgation of Western Christianity is far-flung regions is antiquated. In today’s religious diverse world, there is a variety of religious missions conducted in a variety of ways by a variety of people. Just as *evangelism* is vital for Christians, so *da’wah* is vital for Muslims, *teaching the faith (tabligh)* is vital for Bahá’ís, *proselyting* is vital for Mormons, *dharma transmission* is vital for Buddhists, and *maintenance of san tana dharma* is vital for Hindus. This is no exhaustive list; Jehovah’s Witnesses, new religious movements, and some atheists can be included among those who actively propagate and proselytize for their faith. Even traditions such as Sikhism which are not typically labeled as Missionary Religions demonstrate mission impulses (Ghiloni, 2015:1-2).

To pursue these aims, comparative missiology blends the framework and interests of the discipline of missiology with those of comparative religion by looking at the spread, both deliberate and unintentional, of various religious traditions. Along these lines, Skreslet defines comparative missiology as “the study of mission (or some aspect of mission) undertaken with direct reference to its occurrence in more than one religious tradition or ideology” (Skreslet, 2012:131).

The world religion that most closely parallels Christianity in having its founder send out proselytisers, or missionaries, to make more adherents is Buddhism. Both traditions begin with an emphasis on liberation, which is salvation for Christianity and nirvana for Buddhism. Each of the founders, Jesus in the first century C.E., and the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, around the fifth century B.C.E., direct their followers to cross-political and geographic boundaries, taking the same outward direction as an empire. This outward trajectory results in overlap and encounters between the larger church or sangha in its mission and an empire in its pursuits. Kristin Johnston Largen recognises that, “In spite of the important distinctions characterising” Buddhism and Christianity, the two traditions “share a similar soteriological orientation, even though the end for each is clearly different and the means by which the end is attained are dissimilar as well” (Largen, 2009:x). In

proceeding, however, it is wise to acknowledge that Glenys Eddy identifies the difficulty in applying the term “missionary” to Buddhism. She explains, “Some recent scholarship suggests that the concepts of Buddhist mission and missionary are Anglo-American constructions, the result of nineteenth century Anglo-American Protestant thought” (Ghiloni, 2015:91). Recognising the anachronistic use of the term missionary, first for Christianity and then even possibly more for Buddhism, the term is used here to convey the meaning of sending religions, understanding that a missionary is one who is sent to spread the faith. The new field of comparative missiology proves helpful to explore the relationship between missionary work and empire in both religious movements. In contrast to the apostle Paul, however, who died under the emperor’s sword, this study engages in a comparative missiological study of the proactive support of two emperors for the respective missionary endeavours of Christianity and Buddhism.

5. Parallel Emperors

The comparative missiological approach observes that, like Christianity with Constantine, Buddhism contains in its history an emperor who converted to the religion and then used his office to promote his newfound faith. Just as the religions’ founders Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus exhibit many parallels, so too do these key figures of Ashoka¹⁰ (c. 300-232 B.C.E.) in India with Buddhism and Constantine (c. 272-337 C.E.) of the Roman Empire with Christianity share many characteristics. To whatever degree each of these emperors underwent an authentic conversion, each one convened religious councils, engaged in sacred building projects, and supported and sent out missionaries with imperial patronage. Both figures were concerned with the doctrines of the religion, the unity of that religion’s community, and applied the teachings in some way to society. In both cases, the use of imperial power in both cases helped codify religious teachings and then proactively expanded each religion by sending out missionaries, which demonstrates the historical entanglements of empire with religious mission.

As the Indian emperor of the Mauryan Empire (322-187 B.C.E.), Ashoka, like Constantine, also converted to a new faith and used his position as ruler to both influence the religion and support its propagation. Christmas Humphreys attributes the spread of Buddhism to Ashoka, who, after becoming an adherent, “As head of ‘Church’ and State, he rapidly converted Buddhism from a teaching popular in north-east India to a world religion” (Humphreys, 1962:46). While the authenticity and degree of fullness of both of these emperors’ conversions has undergone

¹⁰ The common English spelling of “Ashoka” is employed here as the name for the Mauryan emperor, although two of the sources quoted here use the transliteration of the Brahmi script as “Asoka” in their book titles.

scrutiny and debate, each of them wielded a transformative effect on his respective religion, and set up a model of the relationship of the religion to the power of the state for several subsequent centuries. In Ashoka's case, Alexander Wynne attributes not just the spreading of but the continued existence of Buddhism itself to the ruler's conversion and support:

[P]erhaps the subsequent success of [Buddhism's] movement was largely due to the third century BC patronage of Asoka, a Buddhist convert who ruled the Mauryan empire, the largest pre-modern Indian polity (and one of the greatest empires of antiquity). A case can be made that without the aid of Asoka, the Buddhists would have remained a minor sect of ancient Magadha, before disappearing like other ascetic groups such as the Ajijikas (Wynne, 2015:12).

Ashoka did not just join the sangha, but possibly kept Buddhism alive and transmitted it to the larger world. Regarding his legacy, Jacob Kinnard suggests that "perhaps his most lasting and far-reaching contributions to the history of Buddhism were the missions that he sent out from India" (Kinnard, 2006:40). Kinnard suggests that these missionary endeavours "allowed Buddhism to expand beyond its homeland and develop into the world religion that it is today" (Kinnard, 2006:40). Stefan Anacker offers a broad summary of the breadth of, and distances covered by, missionaries sent out by Ashoka:

According to traditional accounts, corroborated in part by epigraphical evidence, Asoka sent missionaries of Buddhism to *Kasmir*, *Karnataka*, *North Kanara*, *Konkan*, *Maharashtra*, the *Northwest Regions*, the *Himalayan Regions*, *Suvarnabhumi* (probably here meaning Burma – the Talaing Buddhist community of Thaton claims its origin with Asoka's mission), and *Ceylon* (this mission being headed by Asoka's son, or brother, *Mahinda*). It is through these missionary efforts of Asoka that Buddhism first becomes an "international" religion, and they served as a model for later Indian kings to send missionaries across the sea (e.g., *Iksvaku Virapurusadatta's* missionaries to Ceylon and Burma) (Anacker, 1975:27-28).

J. S. Krüger (1991:69) includes Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Egypt as recipients of Ashokan missions in the West. Due to this diverse and broad list of destinations, Krüger describes what transpired during the Ashoka's period of rule, which marked the beginning of Buddhism's "international character" (Krüger, 1991:13).

One of the areas that received Ashoka's Buddhist missionaries was the Gandhāran civilisation, which resided in what are today parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Over the past couple of decades, Richard Salomon has led the effort of preserving and translating ancient documents of Gandhāra. He describes the effects of Ashoka's mission to this part of Asia:

With the spread of Gandhāran cultural and political power into Central Asia, particularly under the Kuṣāṇa emperors in the first and second centuries CE, Gandhāra came to be directly linked into the commerce of the silk roads, tapping into the lucrative trade in luxury goods between China and the Western world. This source of wealth was no doubt one of the major factors in the power and prosperity of the Kuṣāṇas. Besides the economic benefits that the silk road traffic brought to Gandhāra, it also provided cultural and artistic stimuli leading to the development of an eclectic Buddhist culture incorporating Central Asian and Hellenistic ideas and imagery, while also opening the way for the exportation of Buddhism into Central Asia and China (Salomon, 2018:12).

Like Ashoka, Constantine did not found or invent his religion, but helped to develop it. Paul Stephenson judges that Constantine executed the task of ruling an empire as it intersected with the vibrant and growing Christian movement:

The historical magnitude of Constantine's life is explained by one fact: he was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. But Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of the Roman state, nor was his conversion the reason for the rapid growth of Christianity in the fourth century AD. The remarkable rise of a minority cult to majority faith in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire was driven by other factors, with which Constantine's life happened to coincide. His task was to handle the religious tumult and to harness its energy to his own interests. In doing so, he made the Christian faith acceptable and accessible to those whom it would have had greatest difficulty reaching, far from the urbanized provinces of the east (Stephenson, 2010:13).

Like Ashoka with Buddhism, Constantine not only viewed spreading Christianity as one of his duties, but put imperial support behind it. Scott Sunquist notes how, as the first Christian emperor, Constantine joined the company of other Christian kings whose actions transformed Christian missionary work due to royal support:

The first major shift took place when these struggling missional and worshipping communities began to garner royal support. ... [I]t is the later semi-converted Roman emperor Constantine who really set in motion a new understanding of Christian identity, and thus of Christian mission. Suddenly, under the rule of one emperor, Christianity was transformed from persecuted minority cult to favored faith. This imperial support continued in the West (Europe) even when non-Christian tribes invaded from the north and east.¹¹

¹¹ "The story was very different in Asia, where imperial support waned and large intercultural faiths (Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and later Islam) persecuted Christian communities. Christian mission looks

Whereas Sunquist establishes that Constantine used the power of his office, David Bosch describes how the emperor's decision to send out Christian missionaries set the template for entangling imperial work with missionary work for the succeeding centuries:

In this kind of atmosphere, it was to be expected that mission would be as much a concern of the emperor as of the church. As "imitator of God," the emperor united in himself both religious and political offices. . . . The objectives of the state coincided with the objectives of the church and vice versa, and this applied to mission as well. . . . The practice of direct royal involvement in the missionary enterprise would persist throughout the Middle Ages and, in fact, into the modern era (Bosch, 2011:195).

This pattern would continue to be employed by those who were on the receiving end of the Constantinian-style missions. For example, Bosch describes the "Russian Orthodox mission of the Kiev princes," who had been dazzled by the artistic grandeur of the imperial city, as a "political project" which "went hand in hand with colonialist expansion northward and northeastward into the interior of Russia" (Bosch, 2011:195). As they carried out their part of the greater missionary endeavour, "Evangelisation became virtually coterminous with 'Russification'" (Bosch, 2011:195). What had been novel for Constantine in joining state power to the mission of the church became the norm for those who followed. Whether it is the survival of Buddhism with Ashoka, or solidifying and making Christianity accessible by Constantine, both of these rulers proved to be of great consequence regarding their missionary patronage for their respective religions.

6. Chinese Power and Buddhism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Whereas Ashoka and Constantine proactively aided their respective religions, the negative experience of imperial force can also propel missionary work of a religion. This dynamic is seen in the historical case of Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935), the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. Prior to the People's Republic of China's takeover of Tibet starting in 1951, Diane Morgan reports that, "It is estimated that about 20 percent of the Tibetan population were Lamas (Buddhist monks)" (Morgan, 2004:211). The horrific campaign against Buddhist clergy and structures resulted in having an "untold number of them, and of lay Tibetans as well, were tortured and murdered, and over 6,000 monasteries were destroyed" (Morgan, 2004:211). The persecution drove

very different when Christianity is a royally favored faith" (Sunquist, 2013:28-29).

Buddhist clergy to leave their homeland, as the “Dalai Lama and thousands of others, including the most important of the Lamas, were forced into exile” (Morgan, 2004:211). This forced emigration included not just the people, but the religion with its teachings, artefacts, and stylistic iconography with them:

However, this exile resulted in the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism into all parts of the world. As the Tibetan people, both laypersons and monks, were forced from their homeland, they brought with them their priceless texts and treasured rites. What had hitherto been an unknown and mysterious practice from a remote and mysterious land flowered into one of the most respected and widely known branches of the great Buddhist tradition (Morgan, 2004:211).

Morgan describes the unintended outcome of this persecution and resultant exile as, “What started as an unmitigated disaster for the country of Tibet turned into a spiritual gift for the Western world” (Morgan, 2004:211).

In the context of the highly secular, technologically innovate and economically influential city of Seattle, the Dalai Lama made a visit in 2008. Mirroring the size of the crusades of the Christian evangelist Billy Graham, the organisers of the Seeds of Compassion conference “said about 51,000 people – many of them families – listened under sunny skies to the Dalai Lama speak about compassion” (Myers, 2008). Speaking at Qwest Field, the home of the Seattle Seahawks, the city’s North American football team (Yardley, 2008), the Tibetan leader offered a “wide-ranging, 45-minute address” in which he “called for the elimination of nuclear weapons and spoke of the role of women in nurturing compassion” (Myers, 2008). His presentation also “discussed the need for nonviolence,” proposing that the “21st century should be a ‘century of dialogue’” (Myers, 2008). While the Dalai Lama was not recruiting the audience specifically to convert to and practice Buddhism, he championed ethics from both his own tradition and those shared with other traditions. The astounding turnout of secular Westerners for the conference exemplifies the Dalai Lama’s role as a Buddhist missionary, as the city of Seattle embodies the values and produces much of the culture for the irreligious West. This large crowd demonstrated a growing interest in the leader and his teachings, as the “last time the Dalai Lama visited Seattle, in 1993, his total audience was perhaps a tenth of what is expected this time” (Yardley, 2008).

Having many people attend the conference, the majority of whom were of white European descent, demonstrates both their interest in spirituality and in the Dalai Lama’s function as a religious figure in the contemporary context. Had the People’s Republic of China not invaded Lhasa in 1959, prompting the exile in Dharmashala, then the Dalai Lama most likely would not have become a global religious figure. Charlie Campbell reports on the leader’s status, “In the six decades since, the leader of the world’s most secluded people has become the most recognizable face

of a religion practiced by nearly 500 million people worldwide” (Campbell, 2019). In this role, the Dalai Lama serves as the public representative for global Buddhism, but one sent by the negative pressure of imperial force.

The imperial invasion of Tibet that drove the Dalai Lama was under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong (1873-1976). This invasion contributed to the dispersing of Tibetan Buddhism to outside the borders of Tibet. Whereas Mao and the Chinese government after him have worked to suppress Tibetan Buddhism, the current rule of Xi Jinping so far has demonstrated that he, like his Communist official father before him, shows himself more supportive of Chinese Buddhism than other religions (Johnson, 2017:223-225). Long time China-watcher Nicholas Kristof shares that even the Dalai Lama, under lifelong exile from and painted antagonistically by China, has shown himself to be “enthusiastic about Xi,” as he “spoke admiringly of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, said Xi’s mother was ‘very religious, a very devout Buddhist,’ and noted Xi himself had spoken positively of Buddhism” (Kristoff, 2015). Noting this predisposition, Ian Johnson reports that, “If Xi was favorably disposed toward Buddhism; he seems to have had more troubles with Christianity” (Johnson, 2017:224). Ian Johnson describes the antagonistic approach towards churches prior to his becoming president:

From 2002 to 2007, he served as party leader of Zhejiang Province, where his administration received a black eye when it confronted local Christians. A congregation in the township of Xiaoshan had built a church, but the government declared it illegal and tried to demolish it in 2005. Police moved in, but members of the congregation quickly organized, and hundreds of believers flooded into the area. Although the government eventually succeeded in tearing down the church, it became one of the most embarrassing episodes in Xi’s period in Zhejiang (Johnson, 2017:224).

The suppression of Christianity has continued in recent years, with the government closing hundreds of churches over the past year (Kuo, 2019). This antagonism is not just practiced against Christianity, however, as the Chinese government has placed more than one million ethnic Muslim Uighurs into concentration camps (Perlez, 2019). Therefore, while Xi leads a crackdown on Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism, he may function as an imperial-style supporter of Chinese Buddhism. The oppression of Christianity did not necessarily lead to the spread of Christianity in China, but rather to Christianity becoming more clandestine.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has not been to act as a justification for empire, but rather, to observe the historic reliance of the missionary religions on empire. The above examples demonstrate that both the missionary religions of Buddhism and Christianity have interacted with and relied on the frameworks, features, and dy-

namics of empire, and the power of the emperor himself in the cases of Ashoka and Constantine, to move from one context to another. These entanglements between religious figures and imperial powers are not limited to the early centuries of the religions' origins, but is a process that has continued through subsequent centuries into modern times, as demonstrated with the case of China's propulsion of the Dalai Lama as a missionary on the world stage. Recognising this historical dynamic of the reliance of missionary endeavours on imperial power, whether patronising or persecuting, is important for today because of the signs of a possibly imminent return of formal empire.

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