

Fall 2019 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Seeking the Divine: The Lesser-Known Religious Traditions of Asia
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The Pearl and the Dragon: Silk Road Christianity from Syria to Xi'an

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I. DEFINITIONS

What is Central Asia?

Central Asia is a vast area between modern Iran, India, China, and Russia, including parts of those countries and many more (Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, etc.). It was inhabited historically by speakers of Indo-European (e.g., Persian) and Turkic (e.g., Uyghur) languages, as well as Mongolian and Chinese. The region contains some of the tallest mountains, harshest deserts, and lowest depressions on Earth. The people groups of the region differed dramatically not only in language but also in culture and economy — depending on if they were settled farmers or pastoral nomads. The Silk Road brought these cultures into contact with major empires — Chinese, Roman, Persian/Iranian, Islamic, and Mongol — and served to connect these empires to each other, across Central Asia.

What is Syriac Christianity?

Syriac Christianity is an ancient branch of Christianity that arose in northern Mesopotamia in the first centuries CE. The core of its heritage is the language of Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic and a cousin of the language that Jesus spoke. Syriac Christianity was an early and significant part of eastern Christianity and is renowned for its beautiful liturgy, its poetry, and its manuscripts. Prior to the Arab Conquests of the seventh century it was part of the Roman empire, but afterwards it came under Islamic rule and remains so today for the Syriac Christians still living in the Middle East. Modern Syriac Christianity is split into various denominations stemming, mainly, from theological controversies in the fifth century CE. The major groups include the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Church of the East, and the Maronite Church. One of the largest communities of Syriac Christians today is in Kerala, a state in southwest India. The indigenous Christianity of medieval Central Asia and China died out centuries ago.

II. KEY TERMS

Jingjiao: “The Luminous Religion/Teaching”; the Chinese name used for Christianity in China, beginning in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE); it appears in the title of the Nestorian Monument

Nestorian Monument: Also known as the “Nestorian Stele” or “Xi’an Stele”, a nine-foot-tall limestone monument inscribed in both Chinese and Syriac; erected in 781, its inscriptions

describe both the arrival of Syriac Christianity to the Tang court at Xi'an in 635 and the subsequent history of the Christian monks in China

Sogdian: An east Iranian language that became a lingua franca on the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty; was used in a variety of religious and cultural settings, including Buddhist, Manichaean, and Christian; most texts in Sogdian were found in the excavations at Dunhuang and Turfan in western China; many texts including bibles and liturgy were translated from Syriac into Sogdian; Sogdian script (and, by extension, Mongolian) derives from Syriac

II. BIBLIOGRAPHIES

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