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Sacred Sovereigns across the Silk Road: The Church of the East's Gift of Buddhist-Christian Icons to the Chinese Emperor in 781, and Its Relevance to Buddhist-Christian Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Xi'an stele, set in place in 781 in China's capital of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), by the East Syrian Christian community resident in China officially since 635. The Xi'an stele indicates that an elite within the East Syrian Church presented "an image" (*xiang* 像) to the Chinese emperor in the church's first year of official residence in order to solidify relations between the church and the still recently established Tang Empire (617–907). The essay raises the question of what kind of image, precisely, this might have been, by exploring the possibility that this image was a Byzantine Christian icon with Esoteric (Tantric) Buddhist influences. The article makes three basic arguments in support of this assertion. One is that though the exact nature of the image cannot be determined, there is enough access available to the thinking that surrounded the gift a century and a half after it was given, to suggest that enough Buddhist (one argument) and Christian elements (the second argument) were present in this milieu making the suggestion plausible, that this was a Buddhist-Christian icon. A third argument is that an early form of inter-imperial and inter-monastic debate about the role of images in religious worship was taking place in and around this gift of images. This was not the formal debate one normally thinks of in which two sides write, or speak, back and forth to one another, presenting their views and reasoning on a particular issue, and examining (or attacking) the views of the opposing side. But the Christians of Tang dynasty China were imperial representatives, and their gift of images gave expression to dialogue and debate. This debate culture is recoverable through an examination of the flourishing of Esoteric Buddhism that occurred across the empires of the Silk Road starting in the sixth century, and that gave rise gradually to a new type of monastic and charismatic holy man, one present among both Buddhists and Christians.

KEYWORDS: East Syrian Christianity, Xi'an stele, Tang dynasty China, Silk Road, Esoteric Buddhism, iconoclasm, icons, interreligious dialogue, monastic dialogue, charismatic holy men.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to comparative work in Buddhist-Christian Studies focusing on the premodern period, far more often than not the approach researchers have taken, and have been forced to take, is to compare Buddhist and Christian texts when the writers of the original texts did not know anything of the other.¹ While comparative readings of Byzantine Christian writers and the Tibetan or Chan traditions are important, and an area where indeed cutting-edge work is being done, the basis of any such comparative reading is, and has to be, a creation of a contemporary interpreter. Buddhists and Christians have been living side by side and interacting with one another since antiquity.² Coming to terms with these interactions has relevance to the field of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and Buddhist-Christian Studies.

To be sure, while there are not many Buddhist-Christian interactions in the premodern period, by the eighth century, and along the so-called Silk Roads, several imperial expansions occurred simultaneously linking West and East together that would bring Christians and Buddhists into closer contact.³ This period and context is of interest to comparativists generally since sizable portions of peoples from the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific, and along the landmass of the entire Silk Road between them, were now followers, with these events, of a "world religion."⁴ Tibet adopted Buddhism as its state religion; Islam had come as far as the Hindu Kush and the eastern edge of China; the Uighur Empire had adopted Manichaeism; the Khazar (eastern Turkish) Empire, Judaism; and the Qarluq (again eastern Turkish) Empire had come to adopt Syriac Christianity as the religion of its realm.⁵ This interconnectedness across the world and through religions still considered "world religions" today, having only come about in the eighth century, is one reason that Buddhist-Christian comparativists need to look more closely to the early medieval Silk Road as a place of historical Buddhist-Christian interaction not only generally, but, and as shall be argued here, as a place in which an early form of inter-imperial, and inter-monastic debate was taking place concerning the role of images in religious worship.

Tang dynasty China (617–907) and Sasanian dynasty Iran (225–651), and their interconnected imperial expansions, provided the most fertile ground for interaction between Buddhists and Christians in this setting.⁶ For it was through this nexus that a branch of Oriental Christianity known as the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East (or Church of the East) came to acquire an official place at the Chinese court between 638 and 845.⁷ The East Syrians produced a corpus of materials in Middle Chinese that are highly Sinicized, and the presence of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements abound as a result of this.⁸ Though the Sinicized elements and Silk Road coloring of the East Syrians' Middle Chinese corpus have undergone intense scrutiny, we are still at the beginning stages of research. This research really only began a century ago when, in the caves of Dunhuang, new Christian materials from the East

Syrians were discovered, increasing tenfold the amount of textual material from the Church of the East in Middle Chinese and from the Tang dynasty period.⁹ Advances in the use of digital technology for the study of Buddhist and early Chinese texts are opening new doors in the study of these materials, as the field simply becomes better known internationally, and as electronic communications link together scholars from various disciplines and locales. But as this work requires expertise not merely in Chinese (the language of the documents), but also in Iranian languages, Arabic and Syriac, as well as in Tibetan and other Silk Road languages (part of the context of the documents), collaboration will continue to be the hallmark of the field, as is normal for work in Silk Road studies.¹⁰

While it is not possible to summarize all of the ongoing work with regard to the presence of Sinitic elements in the East Syrians' Middle Chinese materials here (Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian), this essay will turn to an epigraphical text from the East Syrian church rediscovered in 1625. This is the famous "Daqin Stele," or the Propagation Pillar for the Daqin *Luminous Religion in China* (*Daqin Jingjiao Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教中国碑), set in place originally in the year 781, that will in this article, for reasons explained below, be called the Daqin Stele.¹¹ The essay will focus upon a single element within the stele that serves as not only a good, basic introduction to the issue of enculturation of East Syrian Christianity in the Chinese and Silk Road context, but also why the late eighth century should be of interest to Buddhist-Christian comparativists.¹² The stele records an East Syrian church elite person, referred to as Aluoben (Chinese 阿羅本, thought to be the Syriac word *Rabban*, "teacher"), who is said to have presented "an image" (*xiang* 像) to the Chinese emperor.¹³ This passage reads:¹⁴

太宗文皇帝。光華啟運。明聖臨人。大秦國有上德。曰阿羅本。占青雲而載真。望風律以馳艱險。貞觀九祀至於長安帝使宰臣房公玄齡總仗西郊賓迎入內。翻經書殿。問道禁闈。深知正真。特令傳授。貞觀十有二年秋七月。詔曰道無常名。聖無常體。隨方設教。密濟群生。大秦國大德阿羅本。遠將經像來獻上京。詳其教旨。玄妙無為。觀其元宗。生成立要。詞無繁說。理有忘筌。濟物利人。宜行天下。所司即於京義寧坊造大秦寺。一所度僧二十一人。

In the time of the accomplished and cultured Emperor Daizong (r. 626–649), the illustrious and magnificent founder of the dynasty, among the enlightened and holy men who arrived was the most-virtuous Aluoben (Syr. Rabban "Teacher"), from the country of Daqin (Tajikistan). Observing the azure clouds, he bore the true sacred books ("sutras"); beholding the direction of the winds, he braved difficulties and dangers. In the year 635 he arrived at Chang-an; the Emperor sent his Prime Minister, Duke Fang Xuanling; who, carrying the official staff to the west border, conducted his guest into the interior; the sacred books were translated in the imperial library, the sovereign investigated the subject in his private apartments; when becoming deeply impressed with the rectitude and truth of the religion, he gave special orders for its dissemination. The greatly virtuous Rabban, of the kingdom of Daqin (Tajikistan), has brought his sacred books and images from that distant part, and has presented

them at our chief capital. Having examined the principles of this religion, we find them to be purely excellent and natural; investigating its originating source, we find it has taken its rise from the establishment of important truths; its ritual is free from perplexing expressions, its principles will survive when the framework is forgot; it is beneficial to all creatures; it is advantageous to mankind. Let it be disseminated throughout the Empire, and let the proper authority build a Tajik church in the capital in the Yining ward, which shall be governed by twenty-one priests.

The two most important commentaries available today to scholars of the Daqin Stele shed no light on what the images referred to in this passage might have been.¹⁵ Though absolute certainty about their nature is not possible, several educated guesses can be made. In another passage of the stele, reference is made to imperial portraits of the currently reigning emperor needing to be placed within the East Syrians' churches, and upon imperial request.¹⁶ Rabban's images may have been such images. Tang sources indicate that not only did Tang emperors require Buddhists and Daoists to house religious images within their temples, saints, bodhisattvas, and buddhas tended to be depicted with facial features resembling that of the currently reigning emperor.¹⁷ It is also known that within Tang-period artistic patronage, wealthy patrons would choose to have buddhas constructed and painted with facial features resembling those of the patrons of the artworks.¹⁸

As the Daqin Stele's gift of images has a very specific locus both in the China of the 780s, and also reaching across the Silk Road, the present article does not delve into the connection between artistic patronage and Chinese religion proper. The 780s may be characterized in several ways, one of which was as the period following the disastrous An Lushan Rebellion (755–762). Another was as the reign of Emperor Tang Dezong (唐德宗, r. 780–805). While Rabban's gift of images to the Chinese emperor is recorded as having taken place in the early seventh century during the reign of Emperor Daizong (r. 626–649), the text of the stele was completed and the monument set in place in 781.¹⁹ Dezong had just ascended the throne and introduced new tax laws regulating all the Tang Empire's religions, both foreign and domestic.²⁰ Having come to power at the relatively late age of thirty-eight, Emperor Dezong was able to draw upon and make use of experience gained from watching a succession of Tang courts fail to deal successfully with the An Lushan Rebellion and the string of rebellions and connected border incursions that followed. Dezong even witnessed the Tang court having to flee Chang'an, China's ancient and medieval capital, more than once, and with its proverbial "tail between its legs," chased by Tibetan or Uighur invaders.²¹ In order to try to fortify his empire Dezong turned to the Esoteric Buddhism touted by his court's eunuchs, a group to which the Tang Empire's Syriac Christians were deeply connected.²² Another way to characterize the Tang China of the 780s was as a place where Esoteric Buddhism reigned supreme, and along with it, its proclivity for turning monks from other Silk Road polities into power brokers within regional courts, and who tended to use mandalas and images to wield power.²³

However counterintuitive it may at first appear, another way to characterize the 780s in China's capital is to recall that this was the period in which the Chalcedo-

nian Christians of the Roman Empire were in the final stages of the Iconoclasm controversy. There is no guarantee that the East Syrians cared in the slightest about the church decree of 787 in which the so-called iconodules (Grk. *eikono-doulos*, “one who serves images”) won the day at the Seventh Ecumenical Council and religious images were deemed appropriate vehicles for Christian worship.²⁴ But since the Patriarchal seat and headquarters of the Church of the East were in Baghdad and the church had by the late eighth century been under Arab rule, it is impossible that the East Syrians were not aware of the origins of the Iconoclasm controversy in Byzantium’s encounter with Muslim armies.²⁵ Recent research has shown however that Oriental, non-Chalcedonian Christianity, did have its version of the iconoclast conflagration, were iconophilic, and had their own theology of images. Recent research has also shown that certain Central Asians, in the region from which the Daqin Stele states the monument’s donors came—the region of Bactria—held a positive view of the Roman Empire in the late eighth century and called their king on one occasion a “Roman Caesar.”²⁶ It is also known that one of the monks in the East Syrian monastic community at Chang’an was named Constantine.²⁷

This article focuses on Rabban’s gift of images to the Tang court in 781, and attempts to justify use of the terminology “Buddhist-Christian Icons” used in its title to describe them. As the question of what these images were cannot be answered with absolute certainty, the essay examines the thinking and motivations that may have been present among East Syrian elites in the 780s as they wrote about this gift of images to the court. Such thinking and motivation are ascertainable, it is argued, by examining the gift’s context—keeping constantly in mind that what we encounter in the Daqin Stele is a literary description of the gift rather than the gift itself. Beyond justification of the use of the terminology “Buddhist-Christian Icons” in the title, what the article accomplishes, it is hoped, is a contribution to the field of Buddhist-Christian Studies on three levels. First, it provides historical footing to Buddhist and Christian interaction in the classical period drawn from actual historical interaction between Buddhists and Christians (rather than an intertextual hermeneutic developed by contemporary interpreters). Second, it highlights the need for Buddhist-Christian Studies to think more about the Silk Road generally, but, in particular, in terms of the culture of monks and the imperial politics of religious images, of which monks were often the shapers across the entire Silk Road, and which appears to have taken a definitive shape by the 780s. And third, the article offers researchers connections between Byzantine, or Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism, where a similar culture of religious images developed by the 780s, a religious culture where monks and monarchs stood in dialectical tension.

ICONOGRAPHERS WITHOUT BORDERS: ESOTERIC BUDDHISM AND EMPIRES ACROSS TIBET, CHINA, AND IRANIAN CENTRAL ASIA

Esoteric Buddhism is known as *Mijiao* 密教, “Secret Teaching,” and *Zhenyan* 真言, “True Teaching,” in Chinese.²⁸ These names reveal this type of Buddhism’s political and sociological nature, and in the case of medieval China, indicate its proclivity for

elevating monks from outside China, who held this secret knowledge and its secret mantras, within Chinese circles of power. Though no secondary scholarship has yet focused attention on this issue, that such practices may have been part of the cultural environment of the Daqin Stele's writers, is evinced by its references to both "true images" (*zhen xiang* 真像) and "true scriptures" (*zhen jing* 真经) being offered to the court.

Esoteric Buddhism was called *Mantrayāna* in Sanskrit, a term often translated as "the vehicle of secret spells."²⁹ As a mantra was understood as a "mind protector," and not merely a sacred syllable, *Mantrayāna* referred not merely to the recitation of mantras, but to the "entire range of practices meant to transform the practitioner into a deity and the practitioner's world into a mandala."³⁰ The study of Esoteric Buddhism as a pan-Silk Road phenomenon and among Western Buddhologists appeared only in recent years, though its basic characteristics have long been known to Tibetologists. One reason this has taken so long is partly to be explained by Western Buddhology's antipathy toward what has to be described as Esoteric Buddhism's "theocratic" and feudal nature.³¹ Ronald Davidson locates the origins of Esoteric Buddhism in the demise of the Gupta, Vakataka, and Pushyabuti dynasties in northern India and the courtly culture that existed across and between them.³² It was the ideology of the "apotheosis of kings," specifically, which emerged along with a new class of power-wielding monks who were able to break free of caste structures.³³ Esoteric Buddhism was indeed "theocratic," in so far as it tended to make imperial leaders into divine beings, and gave power-wielding monks the ability to move within and across the feudal courts and patronage-based cultures of the Silk Road and participate and share in divine-royal charisma. As Esoteric Buddhism was not a form of Buddhism where truth was spoken to power, as it were, but where truth *was* power, it has not been beloved by Western Buddhists and Buddhologists.

But unless Esoteric Buddhism's theocratic and feudal nature is better understood, its place not only across the Silk Road, but within Tang China, as well as its articulation within Syriac Christianity within the Tang dynasty, cannot be fully appreciated. This is certainly the case in China after the An Lushan Rebellion. Though Esoteric Buddhism had given status to a succession of power-wielding Esoteric Buddhist monks from Central Asia in Tang China since the seventh century, following the rebellion the historical record shows that Christians began to emulate its practices. The East Syrian church leader Adam (Ch. Jingjing) worked together with and was part of the same networks of power in Tang China as were Esoteric Buddhists from Central Asia.³⁴ Adam/Jingjing was working with models of status and agency acquisition provided him by these Esoteric power wielders that he was helping to create along with them.

This is no surprise, given that seventh- and eighth-century Central Asia was a place of "super monasteries"—monastic complexes such as the Navabihar in Bactria, from whence the East Syrians hailed, and the Samye Monastery in southern Tibet, which can be thought of as undergirding and knitting together culturally the entire Tibetan Empire.³⁵ Monasticism with powerful, inter-imperial leaders at

its helm could be found across the Silk Road in the seventh and eighth centuries. Persia, Rome, and the early Muslim imperial world had Christians and Manichaeans. Oriental and Chalcedonian Christianity extended across not only the Silk Road and the Maritime routes of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, but did so on a monastic basis. In the case of Buddhism, the spread of the religion itself along the Silk Road and through trade routes was intimately connected to its ability to confer legitimacy upon local rulers as power-wielding monks blessed patronage networks in which laity, monks, and monarchs formed intimate bonds.³⁶ As André Bateau notes, exchanges between monks and wealthy patrons appear even in canonical Buddhist texts. As patrons gave material wealth and sacred objects to monks and monasteries, monks and monasteries in turn gave supernatural power to their patrons.³⁷

One way in which monks, merchants, and monarchs became bound up with one another across the Silk Road was through patronage objects in the form of religious images. At times, as noted, a monarch's or wealthy patron's personal features would be incorporated into religious images. This phenomenon existed in Tang China and affected not only the Christian community there, but followed East Syrian Christians working as monastic missionaries and scientists into Tibet as well.³⁸ It is here that references to the "Nestorian Stele" rather than the Daqin Stele, its actual name in Chinese, becomes significant. Though the theory is not without controversy, the place name Daqin, where Rabban is said to have come from, may be a reference to the ethnonym Tajik, recognizable in the contemporary Central Asia polity known as Tajikistan. Though this is controversial on linguistic grounds, it is far less controversial on cultural grounds, as it is well known that the Church of the East had for centuries been headquartered in Persia. There is ample Persian influence in the Daqin Stele. The Tajik ethnicity came, by the ninth century, to be linked to Christians and Manichaeans living across Central Asia and China.³⁹ Putting the nail in the coffin of the theory that Daqin refers to Syria or the Roman Empire is the fact that Tang Chinese sources indicate that rebel leader Zhu Ci declared himself emperor of Daqin, indicating it had to be located on the edges of the Tang Empire.

Though Daqin was likely not coterminous with Tibet, Daqin's monastics were operative in Tibet and in Tibet's court.⁴⁰ The Rabban figure appearing in the portion of the Daqin pillar quoted above is a kind of "super monk"—he controls the powers of nature and is in tune with them, and reflects the way in which Adam's father worked effectively as a medic and learned advisor to the court. Daqin physicians and scholars had high status in the Tibetan court in ways similar to what occurred in China. Something of the pan-Silk Road character of the East Syrians' gift of images to the Tang court, and the thinking that surrounded the gift images, and thus what these images might have been, become clear when we note three things. First, the Tibetan Empire had encroached far into Tang territory by the late eighth century; second, the Tibetan emperor had come to be identified with the bodhisattva Vairocana; and third, the emperor's facial features placed within images of Vairocana were displayed throughout the Tibetan Empire—similar to what had occurred in China with Daoist images.⁴¹

BROWNIAN MOTION: HOLY MEN AND ICONS ACROSS THE BYZANTINE
AND ISLAMIC SILK ROAD

If the subjectivity that surrounded the East Syrians' gift of images to the Tang court is partly ascertainable by looking toward Tibet, indicating they may have been Esoteric Buddhist mandalas, it is also instructive to note that the Daqin Stele's reference to images being given to the emperor was written as the Roman Empire was moving through the final years of the Iconoclasm controversy. Though the East Syrians and Chalcedonian Orthodox were no longer in communion by 451, East Syrians maintained cultural connections with Rome long after and acted as cultural intermediaries for the Romans, first with Persians, and later Arabs.⁴² This occurred with the Tibetans and Chinese as well, as it likely did with other Central Asian polities. Though the East Syrians had to work hard to distinguish themselves from their Byzantine co-religionists, they had a culture of religious images. The way in which this was carried across the Muslim world via monastics, and worked within the dialogue of empire, has an analogue in the Byzantine Iconoclasm controversy.

In his 1983 book *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, John Myendorff devotes an entire chapter to the century-long controversy over the use of icons in Christian worship.⁴³ The church's affirmation of the use of icons in 787 would eventually be celebrated as a feast within the church's liturgical year on October 11, known as the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The church's choice to refer to this as "the Sunday of Orthodoxy" is an indication of the degree to which use of icons came to be seen as integral to the Roman church as a whole, eastern and western sides of the church reentering communion after the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.

For Myendorff there were lasting significances of the controversy. Among these he includes:

1. A philosophy of religion, anthropology, and a religious consciousness, which involved the whole person, and which did not despise any functions of the soul and body, nor did leave any of them to the realm of the secular.⁴⁴
2. A culture, as distinct from other Christianities (Latin, Egyptian, Armenian, Syrian), in which art became inseparable from theology.
3. The end of "a certain cultural osmosis with the Arab world, especially during the reign of Theophilus" (813–842), which for Myendorff began in the late Sasanian period. Though this "prevented real dialogue" with the Arab world on the one hand, on the other, it set the stage for Christianity's expansion into the Slavic world, and where this Christianity would come to be known in period sources as "Greek" Christianity.
4. A confrontation between the state and a nonconformist, staunchly independent, monasticism, [one] which assumed a prophetic role and stood for the independence of the Gospel from 'the world.'"

It is ironic that a controversy that started with Roman soldiers and military leaders encountering, and then emulating, Muslim armies' opposition to religious images, led to a Christianity in which monastics and a culture of images set the tone for a religiosity that became standard within the Chalcedonian church and continues to this

day.⁴⁵ Chalcedonian monastic writers such as John of Damascus (676–749), living outside the Roman Empire and in Muslim-controlled Jerusalem, produced a theology of images vibrant enough to counter the Roman court's opposition to images.⁴⁶ Writing in Greek, and circulating his texts back into the Roman Empire through monastic textual networks, John of Damascus's theology of the Christian images in worship was at once anti-imperial and pro-monastic. Recent research on Central Asia in the decades before the Daqin Stele was set in place has shown a favorable attitude to the Roman Empire, and a fiercely anti-Arab stance, and a hope that the Roman Empire would vanquish and remove the region's recent Arab invaders.⁴⁷ Given that the East Syrians were scientific mediators between the Roman world, Persians, and Arabs, as well as the Chinese, and had an iconophilic and monastically centered religiosity of their own, it is certainly possible that the long-range, monastic, and image-centered Christianity of the Chalcedonian/Byzantine church was reflected among the East Syrians in Tang China, though this may have disappeared in the ninth century.⁴⁸

The historian of ancient Christianity and late antique culture Peter Brown, whose work on the so-called Holy Man has inspired two generations of scholars, centered on the late antique monastic as a social nexus, that is, a figure who connected power and populace and at times allowed that populace to influence power—"speak truth to power," in contemporary parlance.⁴⁹ Peter Brown's Holy Man owes much to Max Weber's sociological work on Charismatic Authority.⁵⁰ The Daqin Stele's Rabban is a kind of holy man figure in the Brownian and Weberian senses. Even though the charisma imputed to him was subjectively generated over a century after he came to China and opened it to Persian diplomacy and Christianity, this was a charisma that was part of the social fabric of lived history in the real world. He was a monk as well as a diplomat, a scientist as well as a wonder-worker, and reflected much of the actual sociological binding functions that East Syrian Christians performed among Persia, China, and Central Asia. There is a long-running debate in late antique Christianity as to whether monastics were, could be, should be, or should not be, thought of as model Christians. While the assertion that monks were better Christians than anybody else seems to fly in the face of the New Testament writings, it seems clear that in the Central Asia case it was the monk who was the model.

CONCLUSIONS: THE RELEVANCE OF THE DAQIN STELE'S GIFT OF IMAGES TO BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN STUDIES

This article has made three basic arguments. One is that though the question of what the images were that the East Syrians' Rabban gave to the Tang court cannot be answered with absolute certainty, some access to the thinking and motivations that were present with and surrounding East Syrian elites in the 780s as they wrote about this gift of images to the Chinese court in the Daqin Stele is possible. The phrase "Buddhist-Christian Icons" in the title suggests the second argument—that there were both Buddhist and Christian elements within the thinking that motivated and accompanied the gift and that these elements can be specified. It was also stated in

the introduction that an early form of inter-imperial and inter-monastic debate about the role of images in religious worship was taking place in and around this gift of images. This was not the formal debate one normally thinks of in which two sides write, or speak, back and forth to one another, presenting their views and reasoning on a particular issue, and examining (or attacking) the views of the opposing side. But the Christians of Tang dynasty China were imperial representatives and their gift of images to the Chinese court did bring the Tibetan, Roman, and Chinese empires into, and give expression to, a certain type of dialogue, or debate—that this existed and is important to recover is the third argument of the essay.

The flourishing of Esoteric Buddhism across the empires of the Silk Road starting in the sixth century or so seems to have gradually given rise to a new type of monastic and charismatic holy man.⁵¹ This monastic was much freer than his predecessors to move between and across imperial courts and shape the contours of power. The monastic basis of East Syrian Christianity's move across the Silk Road and into China, pronounced in the sources and visible along with its courtly shaping, is present in Rabban's figuration in the Daqin Stele. That the holy men of late antiquity (which Peter Brown did so much to steer scholarly attention toward and sharpen our vision about) were points of nexus between empire and populace in Christian late antiquity, provides an analytical heuristic that cannot only be taken up and used in the Tibetan, Chinese, and Iranian Central Asian context of the early medieval Silk Road. It can also be used to study actual similarities and points of historical continuity that existed between Christian and Buddhist monasticism and power. While use of the phrase "inter-monastic debate" may appear to stretch the meaning of words beyond their normal usage, and while we are admittedly not witnessing Chalcedonian iconophiles organizing debates with their East Syrian Christian and Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist monastic confreres, Esoteric Buddhists from the sixth century onward thought of themselves as guardians of their realms, using their mantras and mandalas to accomplish this, something the Tang's Syriac Christians clearly participated in.⁵² By looking to this, and through the eyes of the Peter Brown school of late antique historiography, and by taking seriously John Myendorff's assertion that the end of iconoclasm gave Christianity a Christian culture centered in its monasticism, we are able to envision a type of late antique and early medieval Buddhist and Christian comparative study grounded in the realm of history rather than merely in the hermeneutics developed by contemporary interpreters. However counterintuitive it may appear, this came despite the rise of Islam rather than being prohibited by Islam.

NOTES

1. While admitting at the outset that what exactly constitutes Buddhist-Christian Studies is problematic, and admitting as well that no claim is being made to have exhausted the secondary literature, if our focus is limited to the *Buddhist-Christian Studies* journal, as well as the scholarly work of one of its editors Thomas Cattoi, the statement made here stands. In my perusal of *Buddhist-Christian Studies* the present author was able to find no study of actual historical interaction between Buddhist and Christians in the classical periods.

2. As is clear throughout the remainder of the essay, the prime referent of such a statement

is the East Syrian church. The church stemmed from Persia, but had communities along the Silk Road, and was well ensconced in China during the Tang dynasty (617–907) and Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) periods. See Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. I: *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

3. Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 112–139; Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Byzantium, Persia and China: Interstate Relations on the Eve of the Islamic Conquest,” in *Realms of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern: Proceedings from the Third Conference of the Australasian Society for Inner Asian Studies*, Macquarie University, September 21–22, 1998, 47–65.

4. A concept of course rife with difficulties, a world religion here simply refers to a religion extending across, and linking, adherents throughout the world, or in our early medieval Silk Road context, the “known world.”

5. Anatoly M. Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes,” in *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Atlantic*, Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, no. 1, ed. M. Gervers and W. Schlepp (Toronto: Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 1994), 11–33; Mark Dickens (2010), for a particular focus upon the Qarluq Turk’s acceptance of East Syrian Christianity; on the Tibetan Empire’s adoption of a theocratic and courtly patronage-centered form of Buddhism (Esoteric, Mijiao/Vajrayāna) at this time, see Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 147ff., and the discussion below; on the Uighur’s adoption of Manichaeism and this moves to patronage and diplomacy, Larry Clark, “The Conversion of Bügü Khan to Manichaeism,” in *Studia Manichaica: IV, Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus* (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2004), 83–123; on the Khazar’s adoption of Judaism at this time see Oskar Pritsak, “The Khazar Kingdom’s Conversion to Judaism,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 3 (September 1978): 261–281.

6. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*; Lieu, “Byzantium, Persia and China.”

7. A church still very much in existence in the present day. While some East Syrians embrace the term “Nestorian,” by and large they find the term offensive; the current generation of scholars also finds the term not only old-fashioned but inaccurate, as it downplays the much larger emphasis on the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 348–430) in the East Syrians’ historical formation, as well as ignores their long-held official name, which is the Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East (or Church of the East). See Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996): 23–35.

8. The bibliography on the Church of the East in China is now rather vast. For the texts found in the Dunhuang caves of China, which constitute the main primary sources other than the Daqin Stele, see Y. P. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: Academy of Oriental Culture, 1937), 2d ed., 1951. The cutting edge of the current scholarship is to be found in the conference proceedings stemming from the Salzburg conferences: see for example the now five volumes of essays edited by Li Tang and Deitmar Winkler, a sample of which include: *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: 3rd Salzburg International Conference on Syriac Christianity in Medieval Central Asia and China* (London: Global Marketing Publications, 2009); *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in Medieval Central Asia and China*, vol. 4 (Zurich and Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013); and *Winds of Jingjiao: 5th International Conference on Syriac Christianity in Medieval Central Asia and China* (London: Global Marketing Publications, 2016).

9. Rong Xinjiang, “The Nature of the Dunhuang Library Cave and the Reasons for its Sealing,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 11, no. 11 (1999): 247–275; Fujieda Akira, “The Tunhuang Manuscripts: A General Description,” *Zinbun* 9 (1966): 1–32, *Zinbun* 10 (1969): 17–39; for a lively introduction to the early twentieth-century re-discovery of the Central Asian Silk Roads, and the historical events that led to and stemmed from the Dunhuang cave discovery, see Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

10. Simply witness the number of co-authored books and papers one notices when perusing bibliographies related to the Silk Road.

11. The stele receives and has received many names, including Nestorian Monument (designating the name of the East Syrian Christians responsible for it), and Xi'an Stele (indicating the modern name of the ancient and medieval Chinese capital where the stele was found). On why the stele should be called the Daqin Stele, besides the fact that it is the name the stele's writers themselves gave to it, see R. Todd Godwin, "Da-Qin, Tajiks, and Their Doctors: East Syrian Scientists across the Courts of Early Medieval Persia, China, and Tibet, and the Possibility that 'Da-Qin' Christians Were 'Tajik' Christians," in *Salzburg International Conference on Syriac Christianity in Medieval Central Asia and China*, vol. 6 (forthcoming).

12. Paul Pelliot's study of the monument, posthumously published along with several important essays by A. Forte, is the standard item in the study of the Daqin Stele; see A. Forte, *Paul Pelliot's L'inscription Nestorienne de Singan-fou* (Kyoto and Paris: Scuola di Studi Sull'Asia Orientale, Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études, Chinoises, 1996); Max Deeg's forthcoming *Die "Strahlende Lebre,"* will become a standard item along with Pelliot's commentary. James Legge's *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-An Fu* (London: Trubner & Co., 1888; repr., New York: Paragon, 1966), offers a reliable translation in general and is the source of the translated portions of the Daqin Stele appearing in this essay.

13. On Aluoben's name as Syriac Rabban, see Deeg, *Die "Strahlende Lebre,"* 138–140 n. 89, and where the suggestion is made that an Iranian pronunciation stands behind the addition of the initial vowel in the name.

14. See Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-An Fu*, 10–11, for original text and translation.

15. That is to say, Pelliot and Deeg. Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-An Fu*, suggests, 9 n. 3, that the images may have been crucifixes. Given that the cross was akin to an Eastern Orthodox icon among the East Syrians, this suggestion is not implausible. See the discussion and bibliography below on the iconophilia of the East Syrians in Baghdad.

16. As Legge translates in *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-An Fu*, 17, "In the beginning of the period Tian Bao era (742–755), orders were given to the great general Gao Lisi, to send faithful likenesses of the five sacred (emperors) and have them placed securely in the (original) monastery, with a gift of one hundred pieces of silk." The Five Sacred Emperors are associated with Daoism.

17. Deeg notes that Xuanzong's facial features were used in imperial images of the Buddha within imperial temples, and likely may have appeared in the imperial portraits installed in the Church of the East's monastery/church at Chang'an, *Die "Strahlende Lebre,"* 208.

18. Amy McNair, "Early Tang Imperial Patronage at Longmen," *Ars Orientalis* 24 (1994): 65–81; Liu Yang, "Images for the Temple: Imperial Patronage in the Development of Tang Daoist Art," *Artibus Asiae* 61, no. 2 (2001): 189–261.

19. As indicated on the monument itself.

20. On the new tax structure initiated by Emperor Dezong, known as the *Liangshui fa* (两税法), or "Double Tax System," see Max Deeg, "A Belligerent Priest—Yisi and His Political Context," in *From the Oxus River to the Chinese Shores*, 107–121, at 117.

21. On the Tang court having to flee Uighur and Tibetan invaders, see Charles A. Peterson, *Cambridge History of China*, 468–513; *Jiu Tang Shu* 52:1352–1353.

22. For an introduction to the late Tang-period Church of the East's connection to Esoteric Buddhism, see R. Todd Godwin, "'Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God': Re-thinking the Christian-Buddhist Imperial Translation Incident of 787," in *Winds of Jingjiao: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, *Orientalia Patristica Oecumenica*, vol. 6, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (Zurich and Vienna: Akademie Verlag, 2016), 267–282.

23. Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar, eds., *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Geoffrey C. Goble, *Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra and the Ruling Elite* (unpublished dissertation, Indiana University, 2012); Charles D. Orzech, ed., *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Nakata

Mie, 中田 美絵 "[Bukong as a Leader of the Chang'an Buddhist World and of Sogdians]," *Fuku no Chouan Bukkyoukai Taotōi to Sogdojin*, 不空の長安仏教界台頭とソグド人, *Tōyō Gakubō* 東洋学報 89, no. 3 (2007): 33–65. Idem., "Haseiki kōhan ni okeru chūō yūrajia no dōkō to Chōan bukkyō-kai e sō-ki," "Daijō ri omomu rokki haramitsuta kyo" hon'yaku sankasha no bunseki yori," 八世紀後半における中央ユーラシアの動向と長安仏教界—得宗期『大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經』翻訳参加者の分析より [The Buddhist Circle in Chang'an, the Movements amongst Central Eurasia during the latter Half of the Eighth Century—From the Study on Participants in Translation of the *Dacheng Liqū Liu Boluomiduo Jing* 大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經 during the Era of the Emperor Dezong, *Kansaidai gaku tōzai gaku jutsu kenkyūjō* 関西大学東西学術研究所 4 (2011): 153–189; Sam Van Schaik, *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

24. There is a large bibliography on the Iconoclast controversy; for a solid starting point see Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, eds., *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

25. As Lars Brownworth writes: "in 725 Leo III ascended the pulpit of the Hagia Sophia and gave a rousing sermon to the packed church, thundering against the worst offenders (of images). The Muslims, he said, with their strict prohibition of all images, had marched from victory to victory, while the Byzantines had been torn by heresy, angering God by praying to paint and wood for deliverance. . . . To Leo III, Christ had withdrawn his hand of protection and the culprit seemed to be the sacred icons held in such high regard by so many citizens of the empire. . . . Issuing a decree condemning images, he ordered all holy icons and relics to be immediately destroyed." In *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 138–139.

26. On the connection between the Church of the East in the Tang and Tajikistan, see Godwin, "Da-Qin, Tajiks, and Their Doctors," and Franz Grenet, "Une figure historique à l'origine de Gesar de Phrom: Frum Kēsar, roi de Kabul (737–745). État de la recherche, in *Destins divers de l'épopée de Gesar de Ling*," ed. M. Kapstein and Ch. Ramble, forthcoming.

27. This name, on the stele, is shown in both Syriac (*Qostantinos*), and represented in Chinese as 僧居信 "monk Juxin," *juxin* meaning "Constantine in faith," indicating the name was translated into Chinese. Legge does not reproduce all of the monks' names in his reproduction of the stele's original text, but this portion of the stele and a useful discussion can be found in Samuel Lieu's article "Epigraphica Nestoriana Serica," in *Exegisti monumenta: Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams*, vol. 40, ed. Werner Sundermann, Almut Hintze, and François de Blois (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 227–246, at 234.

28. See Charles D. Orzech, "Esoteric Buddhism in the Tang from Atikita to Amoghavajra," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, 282.

29. "Mantra," *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., 530–531.

30. Ibid.

31. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 2, 4, 72 passim.

32. Ibid., 26ff.

33. Ibid., 72.

34. Godwin, "Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God."

35. On the Samye Monastery in southern Tibet, see Beckwith 2011, 148; on the Navabihar in Bactria, see Étienne de la Vaissière, "De Bactres à Balkh par le Nowbahâr," *Journal Asiatique* 298, no. 2 (2010): 517–533.

36. For a sophisticated and empirical treatment of Buddhism's (and Manichaeism's) spread through their connection to business, see Gustavo Benavides, "Buddhism, Manichaeism, Markets and Empires," in *Hellenisation, Empire and Globalisation: Lessons from Antiquity*, ed. Luther H. Martin and Panayotis Pachis, Acts of the Panel held during the 3rd Congress of the European Association for the Study of Religion, Bergen, Norway, May 8–10, 2003 (Thessaloniki: Equinox, 2004), 22–44.

37. André Bateau, "Constellations et divinités protectrices des marchands dans le bouddhisme ancien," *Journal Asiatique* 247 (1959): 303–309.

38. Godwin, "Da-Qin, Tajiks, and Their Doctors."

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. In Tang China and the reign of Emperor Dezong the notion was present that the emperor was the Bodhisattva Manjusri. The Tibetan imperial Buddhist tradition, once linked to the Bodhisattva Vairocana, begins to fuse with the Manjusri tradition, which occurs as Tibet encroaches upon and assimilates Tang territory. See Amy Heller, *Tibetan Art: Tracing the Development of Spiritual Ideals* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1999), 36–37, 49–51, 57–58; also see Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57–61.

42. There is a large and growing bibliography on the Church of the East as scientists and cultural mediators for the Persians, Arabs, and Mongols. See Dietmar W. Winkler and Wilhelm Baum, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 64–69, as a beginning point.

43. John Myendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham, 1983), 2d ed., 51–52.

44. Ibid.

45. Brownworth, *Lost to the West*.

46. Though he does not directly confront or name an emperor as such, the beginning of John of Damascus's first treatise on images seems to be opposing imperial imposition of iconoclasm. He says that the supporters of his iconophilic views are "all the people of God, the holy nation, the royal priesthood (echoing 1 Peter), and he worships the "purple robe of Christ," and, seemingly, not the purple robe of the emperor. See *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (New York: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2003), 21–22.

47. Grenet, "Une figure historique à l'origine de Gesar de Phrom."

48. Stephen Gero, "The Resurgence of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the Ninth Century, according to a Syriac Source," *Speculum* 51, no. 1 (January 1976): 1–5; idem., "Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III Cyril of Alexandria, Image Worship, and the Vita of Rabban Hormizd," *Oriens Christianus* 62 (1978): 77–97; Ken Parry, "Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78, no. 3 (1996): 143–162; Geritt J. Reinick, "The Veneration of Icons, the Cross, and the Bones of the Martyrs in an Early East Syrian Apology against Islam," in *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Bumazhnov, e.a.a (Leuven: Brill, 2011), 329–342.

49. This concept surfaces in many works by Brown starting in the early 1970s, but a *locus classicus* for it is his article "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

50. Steven A. Stofferahn, "The Power, the Body, the Holy: A Journey through Late Antiquity with Peter Brown," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 21–43.

51. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, op. cit.

52. Goble, *Chinese Esoteric Buddhism*, 1–25.