CHAPTER FOUR

A Refuge of Heretics: Nestorians and Manichaeans on the Silk Road

It was during the first four centuries of the common era that the major religions of West Asia defined themselves and began to take the shape in which we recognize them today. To a large extent this was a process resulting from mutual antagonisms: in the Eastern Roman world between Christians and Jews and among proponents of diverse interpretations of Christianity, and in the Iranian sphere between the caretakers of traditional Ahura Mazda–based worship and the emergent threat of Manichaeism.

Human groups tend to hasten toward self-definition mainly when challenged by something they could conceivably be, but, for fear of losing their identity, must demonstrate they are not. (That is why belief systems in traditional societies often appear so frustratingly flexible and inclusive

to modern, description-minded observers.) In religion, preoccupation with "us/them" distinctions is characteristic of the priestly class. We see evidence for this in the legalistic sources of the Hebrew Bible and in the Talmud of the rabbis who succeeded the priests as guardians of Hebraic tradition; we see it in the polemics of the church fathers; and we see it in the merciless efforts of the Zoroastrian magi in suppressing the Manichaean alternative.

The doctrinal disputes of the early common era are inseparable from the political sponsors with which they aligned themselves. When one party proved stronger, rivals were branded heretics. This left the way open to persecution, banishment, or even execution. In the case of two movements which proved highly significant for world history, the losers chose exile. What is striking is that they each followed a similar pattern and headed eastward out of harm's way. In both cases exile ensured their survival for another thousand years, and even some periods of success. The logical channel for this eastward migration, as we have seen, was to join up with the caravans of the Silk Road.

Both Christian and Manichaean sources attest to the close relationship between mercantile and missionary activity. Syriac, the lingua franca of West Asian trade, became the liturgical language of the Eastern church. Among the early Christians the Syriac word for merchant, *tgr'*, was often used as a metaphor for those who spread the gospel. A fourth century Syriac hymn includes the following stanza:

> Travel well-girt like merchants,
> That we may gain the world.
> Convert men to me,
> Fill creation with teaching.[1]

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST

What we call Christianity first emerged as a movement within the Jewish society of Roman Palestine. The interpretations which Jesus' followers gave to Jewish history, as expressed in text and legend, were sufficiently radical to cause a significant proportion of Jews to reject them. In the

process of doing so, Jewish scholars developed a method for determining and stating what their heritage correctly was and did mean; this was eventually institutionalized as the rabbinical tradition, which became normative for Jews and is the basis of Judaism today.

Similarly, among the Christians there were disagreements over interpreting what they should believe and how they should practice their faith. One of the touchiest problems facing the early Christian theologians was to resolve the issue of Christ's true nature, whether divine or human.

Doctrinal disputes within the early Christian church were a reflection of the struggle for supremacy between the highly placed advocates of various interpretations and thus tended to be identified with particular regional power bases. The "diophysite" position of the so-called school of Antioch was that Christ consisted of two distinct persons, one human and one divine, which were brought into coexistence in the person of Jesus, much as the Spirit of God had descended onto the Hebrew prophets. The rival "monophysite" position, associated with the theologians of Alexandria, was that Christ was the eternal Divine Logos, incarnate as a human being—that He was God living under human conditions.

During the early fifth century this controversy expressed itself in terms of a dispute over how Mary should be described, whether as the "Bearer of Christ" *(christotokos)*, or as the "Mother of God" *(theotokos)*. When a Syrian bishop named Nestorius was appointed Patriarch of Constantinople in 428, he taught the Antiochan view, which he summarized with the remark that he "could not imagine God as a little boy." Nestorius' privileged position at Constantinople as spokesman for the Antiochans resulted in a hostile response led by Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria.

The Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II personally liked Nestorius, but his sister Pulcheria despised him. She had enormous influence over the emperor, and knowing this, Cyril made her a focus of his propaganda campaign against Nestorius. In 431 the emperor called a Council at Ephesus to settle on an appropriate terminology for Mary. Cyril was appointed to preside over this council, so it is no surprise that the Antiochan position was denounced as heretical. (In fact, the Antiochan party refused to attend.) The emperor, under pressure from Pulcheria, supported Cyril, and Nestorius was deposed and banished to Egypt.

The Antiochan teaching being dominant in Syria and lands to the east, however, a large part of the diocese chose not to recognize Cyril's authority and seceded to form the Church of the East, with its seat at Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad), capital of the Persian Sasanian Empire. This implied a rejection of the Byzantine emperor's authority as well, and from that point onward, the Nestorian church came to be identified with the Persian world in opposition to the Byzantine.

In 451 the Council of Chalcedon proposed a compromise between the monophysite and diophysite positions, namely that Christ combined two natures but not two persons. The Nestorians tended to see this as something like an acknowledgment of their position, but it didn't go far enough. At a synod in 486 the bishops of the East declared their church explicitly Nestorian, repudiating both monophysitism and the Chalcedonian "compromise" and expressing their belief in "one divine nature only, in three perfect persons. . . . " They went on to state that "[Christ had] two natures, divine and human . . . without confusion in their diversity . . . [yet with] perfect and indissoluble cohesion of the divine with the human. . . ." A major problem for the Nestorians seems to have been what living under human form would imply for God, since their statement continued, "if anyone thinks or teaches that suffering and change inheres in the divinity, and if, when speaking of the unity of the person of our Saviour, he does not confess that He is perfect God and perfect man, let him be anathema."[2]

The synod and a subsequent one in 497 put Persian monophysites on the defensive, and henceforth Nestorianism became the official (although not the only) doctrine of Christian Asia.

Christianity in Iran

In the Acts of the Apostles (2:9) it is stated that Iranian Jews from Parthia, Media, Elam, and Mesopotamia were witness to the miracle of the Pentecost. Since Christianity arose within the Jewish world, it is only natural that its eastward spread from Palestine would have been facilitated first and foremost through existing contacts across the Jewish diaspora.[3] Since these contacts were to a large degree commercial in

nature, it can safely be said that Christianity's first link with the Silk Road was via the Babylonian Jews.

The Parthian Arsacid dynasty, which ruled Mesopotamia and Iran during the first two centuries of the common era, did not consider religion a particularly important political issue. As a result there is little mention of religious sects in Parthian sources, and we can only guess at the spread of Christian ideas in the East based on analysis of later materials. It would seem that in the western part of the Parthian realm Christian communities grew among various Jewish and other sects, local cults and varieties of Iranian religion.

The earliest reference to Central Asian communities in a Christian source is the comment of Bardaisan around 196 CE: "Nor do our sisters among the Gilanians and Bactrians have any intercourse with strangers." The apocryphal Acts of Thomas, written around the same time, mentions the "land of the Kushans" *(baith kaishan)*.[4]

In 224 a new dynasty, the Sasanians, defeated the Parthians. By then Christians were fairly numerous in the Iranian world: an early church history states that in 225 there were twenty bishoprics throughout the Persian-controlled lands.[5] Following the Sasanian Emperor Shapur I's victories over the Byzantines in 256 and 260, Greek-speaking as well as Syriac-speaking Christian captives were deported to Iran and thus added to the numbers of Christians there.

The first three Sasanian emperors largely maintained the Parthian tolerance of non-Iranian religions. Shapur issued an edict stating that "Magi, Zandiks (Manichaeans), Jews, Christians and all men of whatever religion should be left undisturbed and at peace in their belief." Under Bahram II (r. 276-293), however, the Sasanian house tightened its ties to the Zoroastrian priesthood, whose chief priest, Kartir, had been waging a campaign to make Zoroastrianism the official religion of the new empire. To do this, Kartir felt obliged to eliminate any potentially rival religious organizations. In an inscription from the year 280, he names Christians among those groups he believes should be persecuted. Though Kartir also names Jews among those groups he opposes, there is no evidence that Jewish communities were actually targeted.[6] Presumably they were not numerous enough to constitute a threat.

In the face of this lurking animosity the various Christian communities of Iran gradually built up a common church organization through which their position could be strengthened. By 410 the Iranian church was made up of six provinces, and at a synod in 424 the Eastern bishops declared their church administratively independent of the West. The addition of two new provinces in the East, Marv and Herat, is indicative of Christianity's continuing spread along the Silk Road.

Christians under Sasanian rule lived a precarious existence. More often than not, the impulse of the individual emperors was to tolerate them; Christians served in the Sasanian army (notwithstanding the following accusation), and one Christian general even led the Sasanians into battle against the Byzantines. But the magi, who sought to bind up their religious authority with the political authority of the emperor, were always lobbying against Iran's non-Zoroastrian religious communities. The periods when they most succeeded in their political aims (such as under Shapur II from 309 to 379, Bahram V from 421 to 439, and Yazdigard II from 439 to 457) were those in which Christians, Jews, and Manichaeans suffered most harshly. A royal decree issued by Shapur II lists a variety of points on which Christians seemed at odds with the state and with Zoroastrian values:

> The Christians destroy our holy teachings, and teach men to serve one God, and not to honor the sun or fire. They teach them, too, to defile water by their ablutions, to refrain from marriage and the procreation of children, and to refuse to go out to war with the Shahenshah. They have no scruple about the slaughter and eating of animals, they bury the corpses of men in the earth, and attribute the origin of snakes and creeping things to a good God. They despise many servants of the King, and teach witchcraft.[7]

Conversely, when the state and the magi drifted apart (as under Narseh from 293 to 303, Yazdigard I from 399 to 421, Balash from 484 to 488, Kavad from 488 to 531, and Hormizd IV from 579 to 590), Christians and Jews were able to live in peace and often prospered. Indeed, it has appeared to some observers that Christianity may have been on the verge of displacing Zoroastrianism, on the popular level at least, when Islam appeared on the scene in the seventh century. The Central Asian Muslim scholar Biruni, writing in the eleventh century, claims that in his day "the majority of the inhabitants of Syria, Iraq, and Khurasan are Nestorians."[8]

The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire had two major effects on Iranian Christianity. The first was that, despite their ideological differences with the Roman church, Christians in Iran were now frequently suspected of foreign loyalties, which many times was used as justification for their persecution. Indeed, most of the major persecutions of Christians in Iran were directly connected to the political situation between the two empires.

The other effect was that with Christianity now enjoying state sponsorship in the West, doctrinal disputes tended to be won by the parties with government support, which they could then use to suppress those holding rival interpretations. Roman citizens who chose not to convert to Christianity, likewise, were out of favor and often in jeopardy. As a result of the church's state-supported persecutions, a large number of intellectuals and others fled the Mediterranean world for sanctuary in the Sasanian Empire. Many Athenian philosophers, Syrian physicians, and Ṣabean astrologers took this route, to the benefit and enrichment of Sasanian culture.

The now-ruined city of Gundeshapur in southwestern Iran became the new seat of classical Greek medicine, philosophy, and astronomy, and the school founded there was staffed by pagans and Eastern Christians alike. For the next five centuries Gundeshapur was one of the greatest scientific centers of the world. When the Muslim Arabs conquered the region in the mid-seventh century they kept the school intact, and for two centuries more many of the leading minds of the new Islamic faith got their education there from Christian teachers.

Nestorianism among the Sogdians

Sogdiana was—until the Samanid dynasty made it the most dynamic center of the Muslim world in the tenth century—never a region of

religious orthodoxy. Settled in prehistory by Iranian tribes, it was at the fringes of both east and west, equally removed from the centers of all the great religious traditions. It had always been middle ground, a transit point, a place where anything could and did pass through sooner or later.

Alexander left Greek influences in Sogdiana in the fourth century BCE. Iranian nomads such as the Sakas, and Turkic nomads as well, were always a nearby presence. The Parthians left the cultural mix there unmolested, and for the Sasanians, the province was too remote for the standardizing efforts of the Zoroastrian magi to be effective.

Sogdian merchants were the real masters of the Silk Road, whoever the ephemeral powers of the time might be. Under the rule of their fellow Iranian peoples the Parthian and the Sasanians, Sogdian merchants moved easily in the Iranian lands to the west, where some of them were won over to the Christian message, just as others active in the former Kushan lands had embraced Buddhism.

There do not appear to have been any obstacles preventing Sogdian converts to either tradition from importing their new faith either to Sogdiana proper or conveying it farther east in the course of their business ventures. By the year 650 there was a Nestorian archbishopric at Samarqand in the heart of Sogdiana and another beyond that at Kashgar; in all over twenty Nestorian bishops had dioceses east of the Oxus River.[9]

For centuries Sogdian was the lingua franca of the Silk Road. But, as has been said earlier, through their widespread dealings Sogdian traders knew foreign languages as well, which made them especially well equipped to serve as translators. Among the Nestorian texts which have been discovered in the Tarim Basin since the beginning of the twentieth century, a preponderance are in Sogdian or show evidence of having been translated from Sogdian versions. Although Syriac was the liturgical language of the Nestorian church, the language in which Nestorian Christianity was disseminated across Asia was principally Sogdian, as it was for Buddhism and Manichaeism as well.[10]

Most of the Christian texts found in the Tarim region were discovered by four German expeditions to the Turfan oasis from 1902 to 1914. The bulk of these manuscripts date to the ninth and tenth centuries from a Nestorian monastery at Buyaliq, north of the oasis. They

ude hymns, psalms, prayers, lectionaries from the New Testament, commentaries.[11] Although for the most part they are translations n Syriac, some of the Sogdian versions are older than their known iac counterparts, and a few do not have known Syriac versions.[12] The istian texts in Sogdian, unknown before the twentieth century, have stantially rounded out scholars' understanding of Nestorianism.

estorianism among the Turks

omadic Turks in Central Asia were first taught the art of writing by rsian Nestorian priests in the entourage of the dethroned Sasanian mperor Kavad sometime around 550. A group of these priests stayed ong the Turks for seven years and baptized many of them. The ests learned Turkish and rendered it in writing for the first time, ng the Syriac alphabet.[13]

The Sogdians of Central Asia, who traded directly with the Turkic mads, were a more regular cultural influence on them. A Chinese ter of the Sui period (581–618 CE) noted that "The Turks themselves simple-minded and short-sighted and dissension can easily be roused ong them. Unfortunately, many Sogdians live among them who are ning and insidious; they teach and instruct the Turks."[14]

The native religion of the Turkic and Mongol peoples of Inner ia is generally described as shamanistic. They held the sky god, ngri, as supreme, the male principle which was balanced by the ale earth. Religious behavior was practical; rituals were connected th basic survival needs like hunting, healing, and fertility. The spirit rld was accessed through a shaman, a medium who communicated th the spirits after working himself into an ecstatic trance.[15] Shamans ll exist in Inner Asia today, even among nominally Buddhist or uslim populations.

Apparently some of the first Christian priests to win followers among e Turks were perceived by them as shamans. Syriac records of the storian church recount that in the year 644 the metropolitan of Marv, s, impressed a Turkish king by using the sign of the cross to stop a ere thunderstorm.[16] The king was thereby enticed to accept Chris-

tianity, and his subjects along with him. Scholars of archaic Turkish religion have noted that the stopping of thunderstorms, through use of a stone called a *yat,* was a traditional function of the shamans.[17]

The same sources state that in 781–782 a second major conversion occurred among the Turks, again with the conversion of the king leading to that of his subjects. As a result of this second mass conversion, the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy in Baghdad established a Central Asian metropolitan specifically to instruct Christian Turks.[18] A contemporary writer states that information concerning the successes of missionaries among the Turks comes from a "letter which some merchants and secretaries of the kings, who had penetrated as far as there for the sake of commerce and of affairs of State, wrote to Mar Timothy."[19]

A third mass conversion took place in 1007, when according to the sources 200,000 Turks and Mongols became Christians. The standard identification of this latter group with the Kerait tribe has recently been questioned,[20] but the scale of the conversion was certainly quite large. The medieval Jacobite writer Bar Hebraeus explicitly credits Christian merchants, presumably Sogdians, with bringing the conversion about.

According to Bar Hebraeus' account, the ruler of this nomadic group had been saved from a snowstorm by following a vision of a Christian saint. "When he reached his tents in safety," Bar Hebraeus relates, "he summoned the Christian merchants who were there, and discussed with them the question of faith, and they answered him that this could not be accomplished except through baptism." On hearing this news, the metropolitan sent a priest and deacon to perform the necessary baptisms and offer instruction.[21]

Under the patronage and protection of the Mongol Qara-khitai in the twelfth century, Nestorian Christianity experienced a new surge in popularity. Sometime around 1180 the Nestorian Patriarch Elias III established a new metropoly in Kashgar, with authority extending up into the so-called Seven Rivers region (Turk. Yeti su; Rus. Semirechye) in the southern part of modern Kazakhstan.

By the dawn of the Mongol period Christianity was certainly the most visible of the major religions amongst the steppe peoples. What Christianity meant to them, however, is another question. The sources

icate that the essential test of a Christian was baptism; apart from that iatory ritual, there is little information available regarding how istianity among the nomads was practiced. Some tribes apparently portable tent chapels, but numerous accounts show that many of ir rituals were simply Christianized forms of traditional practice, such the drinking of fermented mare's milk, called *kumiz.*

One may also contemplate what the nomads' interest in Christianity s. Was it merely allegiance transferred to the "shamanistic" power ich had demonstrated the greatest capabilities? Or was there some ught of cultivating connections with Christian traders along the Silk ad? Both are likely possibilities.

estorianism in China

e Chinese, who have inherited one of the world's oldest and greatest vilizations, have a long history of considering other cultures beneath eir interest. Uncharacteristically, some of the early emperors of the ang dynasty (especially Hsüan-tsung, who reigned from 712 to 756) d a fascination with things foreign that sometimes verged on a mania.[22] such an atmosphere the alien traditions of traders from the West were usually welcome and ehcouraged.

Sogdian and Iranian merchants and missionaries brought Christian- to China during the seventh century. In fact, the Chinese originally ught the cradle of Christianity was Iran, and referred to it as "the nian religion" for over one hundred years before correcting their cords in the mid-eighth century. An imperial T'ang edict of 638 relates at an Iranian priest named A-lo-pen (Abraham?) had arrived at court ee years earlier.[23] A-lo-pen had brought with him scriptures, which re translated into Chinese so that the emperor could understand them. he emperor approved, and gave the Nestorians authority to propagate eir faith throughout the empire. This event is generally considered to ark the introduction of Christianity into China.

A monument erected in the T'ang capital of Ch'ang-an (Xian) in 81 contains a wealth of information about the local Nestorian commu- ty's first 150 years. Iranian and Central Asian names occur throughout,

indicating a continuous influx of Westerners along the Silk Road. One of the monument's most interesting pieces of information concerns a monk by the name of Adam, who assisted in the Chinese translation: He is said to have collaborated on the translation of a Buddhist treatise as well. Adam knew no Indian languages, so the Buddhist text in question must have been in Sogdian, presumably his native language.[24]

A seventh-century *Eloge of the Holy Trinity* in Chinese found at Tun-huang by the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot states that no less than thirty Nestorian works had been translated into Chinese by the late eighth century. It does not appear that the Nestorians won many Chinese converts, however. Like the Buddhists, they found themselves in the position of having to communicate concepts and values entirely alien and even offensive to the Chinese. Unlike the Buddhists, the Nestorians in China do not appear to have succeeded in adapting their message to Chinese tastes.

This does not appear to have been for lack of trying, since they referred to their treatises as "sutras" and to Christian saints as "buddhas." By the time the Xian monument was erected, Nestorianism was known in Chinese as "the Brilliant Religion" *(ching chiao)*. On the other hand, the name of the Christian savior himself, which is Yishu in Syriac, sounded in the pronunciation of the period like the Chinese term for "a rat on the move."

It would seem therefore that for the most part the Nestorian community in China consisted of foreigners, as was the case with Judaism and Zoroastrianism. All three traditions were brought into China as the faiths of traveling merchants, and their fates were tied to those of the expatriate merchant communities themselves.

The T'ang court's enthusiastic taste for foreign people, ideas, and things also allowed for the proliferation of religious quackery. Many religious figures were engaged not for their spiritual teachings but for their more worldly skills. Christians and Manichaeans especially were valued for their knowledge of astrology and medicine, inherited from the traditions of Mesopotamia.

One Chinese source mentions a priest who had the power to "chant people to death and then revive them"—evidently a hypnotist. A

hist monk from India named Narayanasvamin claimed to be two red years old and to possess elixirs of immortality. Taoist alchemists fantasized about such potions since ancient times, but in this case Indian's concoctions were found to be ineffective and he was sed from court.[25]

Religious buildings often served as "cultural centers" where foreign rents as well as interested locals could gather. Mazdaean temples in chow and Lo-yang, for example, regularly hosted magic shows h drew large crowds. Although Hsüan-tsung actually encouraged activities during his reign, more xenophobic Chinese rulers could ive this kind of foreign influence as threatening.[26]

In the year 845 the T'ang Emperor Wu-tsung, who was a supporter aoism, outlawed all foreign religions (even Buddhism, which was ly foreign any more), forcing them underground. In 980 a Nestorian k told a Muslim writer in Baghdad that he had been sent by the ch to China seven years earlier in order to "set the affairs of the istian religion in order" there, but had found no Christians surviving here in the country.[27] Christianity appears to have disappeared China, to be reintroduced under the Mongols three centuries later.

MANI

opotamia in the third century of the common era was home to a liferation of religious sects. Long the buffer zone fought over by cessive Greek and Iranian empires, it was a meeting ground of cultures re all were represented. Israelites had lived there for a thousand years gside Iranian Mazda-worshippers and native Mesopotamians, whose inal religious beliefs survived among the Sabeans, who were wned for their knowledge of astrology. By this time there were also ous Christian denominations as well as hybrid Jewish-Christian stic baptist sects.

It was into one of the latter, possibly Elkesaite or Mandaean, munities that the prophet Mani was born in the year 216 to parents royal Parthian ancestry.[28] Mani was raised in an ascetic religious ironment, where Christian and Jewish ideas were set against a

dualistic gnostic backdrop. He received his first revelation at the age of twelve and another when he was twenty-four. From the time of this second revelation, Mani took up the role of prophet and set out to preach his message.

Mani's first missionary journey was to the Kushan lands of northwestern India. This was one of the thriving centers of Buddhism at that time, and Buddhist influences were significant in the formation of Mani's religious thought. The transmigration of souls became a Manichaean belief, and the quadrapartite structure of the Manichaean community, divided between male and female monks (the "elect") and lay followers (the "hearers") who supported them, appears to be based on that of the Buddhist *sangha*.

On his return to Iran, Mani managed to convert at least two princes of the new Sasanian ruling house and spent several years in the entourage of the Emperor Shapur himself. Mani must have aspired to make his new faith the official religion of the new empire; unfortunately his rival at court, the magian priest Kartir, had the same idea.

During Shapur's reign Mani enjoyed official patronage and protection. As a result he was able to send followers to all corners of the Sasanian realm in order to spread his teaching. The new religion rapidly won converts throughout the land. For nearly fifty years the popularity of Mani's vision posed the greatest threat to the authority of the traditional magi led by Kartir.

After Bahram I acceded to the Sasanian throne in 273, Mani's fortunes changed. At the instigation of Kartir, the emperor had Mani arrested in 276, just as the latter was attempting to flee to Parthia. It is interesting that in his final interview with Mani, the emperor reproaches him not on the basis of his religious views but rather on the accusation that he has neglected his duties as a physician: "What are you good for, since you go neither fighting nor hunting? But perhaps you are needed for this doctoring and this physicking? And you don't even do that!" Mani defends himself on the same grounds: "Many are those whom I have made rise from their illnesses. Many are those from whom I have averted the numerous kinds of ague. Many were those who were at the point of death, and I have revived them."[29]

This exchange suggests that religious leaders were valued more for ir skills as doctors than as healers of souls, an interpretation which ds ample corroboration elsewhere throughout premodern history.[30]

Following this conversation, the emperor sentenced the prophet to ison. After several months, Mani died in detention at the age of sixty.

omething from Everyone: New Universal Tradition

hat made Mani's message so attractive to so many people was that he de every effort to "speak their language." He did so literally but also uratively, borrowing ideas, symbols, and religious terminology from ery tradition in existence. Religious systems spread most effectively en they succeed in appropriating the mind-set and worldview of their get audience, making the "new" message seem merely a "perfection" old truth, compatible with people's traditional understanding. Mani nd his disciples were unparalleled masters of this technique.

Having been born and raised in the lands where Asian and Mediranean civilizations had met through the centuries, Mani was condioned from childhood by heterodox religious notions drawn from a riety of sources. His system blends Semitic and Iranian traditions so mpletely that scholars today continue to argue over which is its real derlying source.[31]

Manichaeism is generally treated as a gnostic system.[32] The origins gnosticism are obscure but probably date to sometime before the ommon era. Gnosticism posits a radically dualistic view of the universe, which "good" is equated with spirit and "evil" with matter.

Gnostics favored esoteric interpretations leading to salvation through nowledge, a possibility which held special appeal for intellectual elites. It s an *approach* to truth rather than a religious tradition per se; Gnostics ere found among Christians, Jews, and other groups. Representatives of e mainstream invariably saw the "hidden" interpretations of the Gnostics a threat to orthodoxy and continually declared them heretics.

Mani presents himself as the culminating prophet in human istory, following Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus. His cosmology takes

many Iranian figures, including Zurvan, Ormazd (Ahura Mazda), Ahriman (Angra Mainyu), and various good and evil spirits, and imbues them with gnostic interpretations; he equates spirit with light (expressed as the supreme god Zurvan) and matter with darkness. The universe is seen as a realm of struggle between good and evil, with the good, represented as particles of light, striving to be liberated from the evil matter in which it is trapped.

The most visible figure in Manichaean mythology is Jesus. Mani refers to himself throughout his life as "the Apostle of Jesus Christ." Mani's Jesus takes three forms, however: Jesus the Man, Jesus the Living Soul, and Jesus the Splendor. The first is the historical Jesus of the Christians, but whose death on the cross Mani considers to have been an illusion. The second is the "suffering Jesus" *(Jesus patibilis)*, the force of goodness in the form of light particles which are trapped in all living things. Jesus the Splendor, a conceptualization borrowed from the Mandaeans, is the embodiment of Light who visited the First Man and will return as Savior at the end of time.

Mani taught that reproduction is an evil, since with each succeeding generation the light particles trapped in every individual are further divided among one's descendents. The Manichaean "elect," therefore, were to practice abstinence. The following Manichaean parable about a nobleman whose wife has just died (versions of which are found both in early Christianity and later in Islam) illustrates this abhorrence of carnality as well as worldly delusion symbolized by drunkenness:

> He saw [the corpse] and thought, "This is my wife." He went in [to the tomb] and lay down beside the corpse. And because he was drunk and foolish, he put his arms around the corpse, behaved shamelessly and united with it. Because of his exertions the corpse burst open. Blood, pus and foul and evil things in its nauseating body oozed and flowed out. And the noble man lay in blood and pus with his whole body and all his clothes, and he was covered from head to foot. And because of his drunken state, he thought to himself, "I am very satisfied."
>
> When morning came and the sun rose, the noble man's drunkenness passed. He awoke from his sleep. Raising his head, he saw that he was lying in a tomb, a corpse being at his bosom. Pus and blood were oozing out and spreading a terrible odor. He looked at himself and saw that he was all covered with blood and lying in excrement. He was struck by panic and seized by fear; he screamed loudly, quickly left in his mourning-dress and ran away. The more he ran the more he vomited. Then he quickly tore to bits and to shreds the gown that had been so pure, threw it away and then ran on. He reached a pond, jumped into it, and washed and cleansed himself. . . .[33]

But Mani's highly organized propaganda strategy involved more than simply adopting existing religious stories and symbols and giving them new meanings and interpretations. In most religions, scriptures are handed down orally over long periods before being written down, leaving them open to accusations of human corruption and falsification. Mindful of this danger, Mani made a point of writing down his revelations himself, producing at least seven canonical works which formed the scriptural foundation for his religion.

Mani also believed strongly in the power of images to convey religious truth. (This may have been partly a concession to the fact that literacy was not widespread.) A talented painter, he illustrated his own scriptures. His skill as an artist won him a reputation which, somewhat ironically, is his most enduring legacy, outlasting the very religion he founded. To this day, his heretical beliefs forgotten, he is remembered in the Muslim world as the greatest painter who ever lived.[34]

It was the Manichaean elect who bore the responsibility of spreading the message of the faith as itinerant preachers, following the model of Christian and Buddhist monks. The elect were distinguished by the wearing of white robes and adherence to a vegetarian diet. They had to exercise the utmost care not to engage in any activities which contravened the principles of their religion, even activities necessary for their own survival. Even more than Buddhist monks, the Manichaean elect were utterly dependent on their lay followers, the "hearers," who supported them. They could not even prepare their own food, since that would damage the light particles that were believed to reside in all living things, including vegetables, and before eating they were to recite: "Neither have

I cast it into the oven; another hath brought me this and I have eaten it without guilt."[35]

Manichaeism on the Silk Road

Mani's religion began to enjoy popularity in the Mediterranean world within his own lifetime, although even before the Roman Empire became officially Christian it persecuted Manichaeans as adherents of a "foreign," Persian faith. Once Christianity became the state religion, Manichaeism was considered even a greater threat, since it claimed to be an esoteric, and therefore "truer," form of Christianity itself. Although subject to the most ruthless suppression, dualist and anti-worldly ideas which echoed Manichaeism survived in Europe into the Middle Ages, through the Cathar movement in Provence and the Bogomils in the Balkans.

To the east Manichaeism fared better, at least initially. It enjoyed several decades of protection during Mani's lifetime, during which it had spread into Central Asia along the Silk Road beyond the Oxus River. Once again it was Sogdians who played a major role in the transmission of the faith, with their capital, Samarqand, becoming the center of an early and active Manichaean community.

Using their linguistic skills, Sogdians translated Manichaean texts from Syriac, Middle Persian, and Parthian into Sogdian and thence into Turkish and eventually Chinese. By the end of the sixth century the Sogdian Manichaeans were strong enough to declare their independence from the *archegos,* the head of the church in Baghdad, giving rise to a schism which was to persist for over a century.[36]

An Iranian Manichaean missionary named Mihr-Ormazd traveled to China sometime in the late seventh century.[37] He was granted an audience with the Chou Empress Wu and presented her with a text entitled *The Sutra of the Two Principles,* which would become the most popular Manichaean work in China.[38]

The missionary's success brought on the jealousy of the Buddhists at court, who quickly became opposed to the new teaching. Sometime after 820, Chinese Buddhists began circulating the following story:

> Wu K'o-chiu, a man of Yüeh, resided in Ch'ang-an. . . . He began to practice Manichaeism and his wife Wang also followed his example. She died suddenly after more than a year. Three years later she appeared to her husband in a dream, saying, "For my perverse belief I have been condemned to become a snake and I am below the *stupa* at Huang-tzu p'o. I shall die tomorrow at dawn and I wish you would ask the monks to go there and recite for me the Diamond Sutra so that I could avoid other forms of suffering."[39]

The husband does as he is asked and afterward becomes a good Buddhist again.

The T'ang rulers looked on Manichaeism with suspicion after their restoration in 705. In 732 the emperor issued an edict to the effect that the religion could be propagated only among non-Chinese. The reasoning given for this restriction shows that Buddhists were behind it: "The doctrine of Mar Mani is basically a perverse belief and fraudulently assumes to be [a school of] Buddhism and will therefore mislead the masses. It deserves to be strictly prohibited. However, since it is the indigenous religion of the Western Barbarians and other [foreigners], its followers will not be punished if they practice it among themselves."[40] It is clear that just as the Manichaeans in the West attempted to present their religion as an esoteric form of Christianity, in the East they tried to portray it as a type of Buddhism.

As the Sasanian government became increasingly bound up with the Zoroastrian clergy, Manichaeans in Iran gradually moved eastward beyond the reach of the state and the magi. After the Arab Muslims conquered the Sasanian Empire in the 640s, many Manichaeans returned from Central Asia to Iran and Mesopotamia. The Umayyad Arabs, based in Damascus, were generally content to leave the religious matters of their subject populations alone. But in 751 the Abbasid revolution brought a wave of religious reform to the Muslim-controlled lands.

During the second half of the eighth century many Persian bureaucrats in the Abbasid administration began to exert a form of cultural revival vis-à-vis the Arab ruling class. In literature this took the shape of the so-called *shu'ubiyya* movement, through which many Persian literary classics were

translated into Arabic. Within the same class of Persian intellectuals, crypto-Manichaeism became a popular form of self-assertion. Soon Mani's faith acquired the dubious status it had possessed in the Sasanian and Roman worlds, as the official religion's archenemy number one. Even those merely suspected of being Manichaeans were ruthlessly persecuted, and many believers chose to flee eastward once again.

The Uighurs

For a relatively brief period of about seventy-seven years, from 763 to 840, the much-maligned Manichaean faith enjoyed the status of an official, state-sponsored religion. This was thanks to the Uighur Turks, who subdued the former Turkish confederation and founded a state on the southern Siberian steppe in 744.

Chinese relations with the steppe had always been characterized by appeasement through bribes, often in the form of silk, as a result of which some of the steppe peoples were able to become quite rich. By the time the Uighurs came to power, the T'ang were beset by frequent internal problems and came increasingly to rely on the Uighurs for support.[41]

Beginning in 755 the T'ang emperor was faced with a rebellion led by a general of mixed Sogdian and Turkish origin, Roshan ("the bright one"), sinicized to An Lu-shan. The emperor called upon the Uighurs to assist him in putting down the rebellion. It was after retaking the T'ang city of Lo-yang in 762 that the Uighur *kaghan,* or king, known in Chinese sources as Mou-yü, made the acquaintance of some Sogdian Manichaeans living there. These Sogdians made a great impression on the *kaghan,* and when he returned home to his capital of Qara-Balasaghun north of the Tien-Shan Mountains he took four of them along. Within a few months they had persuaded him to adopt Manichaeism. In 763 the *kaghan* made it the official religion of the Uighur state, banning the Turkish shamanistic tradition.

Why the *kaghan* did this is something of a mystery. The chief Manichaean monk, known by his Chinese name Jui-hsi, is reported to have had great eloquence and persuasive skill. The *kaghan,* as a military man, may have liked the rigid discipline of the Manichaean lifestyle.

Another aspect of the religion's appeal was that the Chinese didn't like it, and the Uighurs were seeking to demonstrate their independence from the T'ang. A third reason may have been in order to facilitate commercial contacts with the West through the Sogdians.[42]

Characteristically, the Manichaean missionaries among the Uighurs used the strategy of associating their religious concepts with those of the Turks. For example, the Manichaean gods of the two palaces of light are equated with the sun and the moon, which the Turks revered. The term for the palaces themselves was rendered into Turkish as *ordu,* literally the place where a nomadic king's tent is erected. The Manichaeans attached the Turkish word *bilig* ("knowledge"), a term the nomads had associated with leadership from ancient times, to all five of the cardinal virtues (love-knowledge, faith-knowledge, passion-knowledge, patience-knowledge, and wisdom-knowledge). For "soul" they used the Turkish *qut,* or "heaven-granted blessing."[43] Again we see the importance of language and translation in spreading religious concepts to diverse cultures.

With the Uighur state to back them up, Iranian and Turkish Manichaeans living in China were able to obtain increased privileges from the T'ang government, including the building of new temples. Between the years 768 and 771, the T'ang emperor ordered Manichaean temples to be built in Ch'ang-an, Lo-yang, Kinchow, Nanchang, Shao-hsing, and Yangchow.

In the Uighur lands, the Manichaean priests became one of the most powerful social classes. A large number of the Manichaean texts extant today date from the period of Uighur rule in the Tarim region. One text speaks of the efforts to eliminate the practices of the Turks' traditional religion: "Let all sculpted or painted images of the demons be entirely destroyed by fire; let those who pray to genies or prostrate themselves before demons all be [?] and let the people accept the Religion of Light. Let [the country] with barbarous customs and smoking blood change into one where the people eat vegetables; and let the state where men kill be transformed into a kingdom where good works are encouraged."[44]

Manichaeans seem to have enjoyed Uighur protection even after Manichaeism ceased to be a state religion. The Muslim writer Ibn Nadim relates that in the ninth century, the governor of Khurasan heard there

was a community of five hundred Manichaeans practicing in Samarqand and wished to kill them. The Uighur *kaghan* sent word to the Khurasan governor that if the Samarqand Manichaeans were harmed, he would kill all the Muslims living under his authority.[45]

The Uighurs used their leverage as supporters of the T'ang following An Lu-shan's rebellion to protect Manichaean communities in China as well, but after the Uighur kingdom was overrun by another Turkic group in 840 there was a backlash. Three years later the T'ang government closed all but three Manichaean temples in China, informing the Uighur *kaghan* that they would be reopened once the Uighurs reestablished their kingdom.

Within a few months, however, the T'ang government went ahead and closed the remaining temples, seizing their property and executing the Manichaean priests. The Japanese pilgrim Ennin describes the event: "An imperial edict was issued, ordering the Manichaean priests of the Empire to be killed. Their heads are to be shaved and they are to be dressed in Buddhist robes and are to be killed looking like Buddhist *sramanas* (monks)."[46]

It has been suggested that this persecution was at least in part economically motivated, since the Manichaean temples were probably functioning as money-lending institutions run by Uighur merchants.[47] Two years later a similar pattern would play itself out against the most successful of the foreign religions in China, Buddhism. Christianity and Zoroastrianism likewise lost their protection within the empire at that time and disappear from the Chinese historical record.

After their defeat in 840 the Uighurs moved eastward into the Tarim Basin and established a new capital at Qocho. Although the majority of the new Uighur kingdom's population was Buddhist or Christian, Manichaeans retained official favor and their monasteries, like those of the Buddhists, prospered from the administration of farmlands.

Panegyrics addressed to the Uighur kings of Qocho indicate that Manichaeans and Buddhists alike saw him as a protector.[48] Texts and art from this period, mostly discovered hidden in monasteries, show markedly syncretistic trends.[49] Over the following centuries Manichaeism seems slowly to have lost its adherents to Buddhism and Christianity,

by the time of the Mongol conquest it may have become extinct
g the Uighurs.

In China, however, the religion continued to succeed in winning
e converts. Buddhist writers in the thirteenth century were still
ucing polemics against Manichaeism, disparaging it along with
Buddhist sects, those of the "White Lotus" and the "White Cloud,"
eviant interpretations of Buddhism. The Ming Code of the
wing century outlawed the three altogether.[50] This continued
nosity from Buddhists in China drove Manichaeans underground,
the community survived.

BLURRING DISTINCTIONS: SHARED IDEAS, SYMBOLS, VOCABULARIES

n the earliest times, Manichaeism attempted to portray itself as an
clusive, universal religion. Its missionaries consciously drew on the
bols and vocabulary of their target audience, attempting to render
new teaching more familiar and acceptable.

Mani's disciple Mar Ammo, a Parthian, had great success propagat-
he new teaching in the eastern lands where Buddhism was prevalent.
gdian text states that Mar Ammo "fully exposed the Buddhahood
e Prophet of Light."[51] Another hymn, in Parthian, uses Islamic
inology, such as *dhu'l-fiqar*, the sword of Muhammad, perhaps to
ise its content from persecution by Muslims.[52] Another important
missionary, Mar Zaku, was eulogized by Manichaeans living along
Silk Road as "the Great Caravan-Leader," an epithet which Central
n Buddhists applied to Avalokitesvara.[53] An apocryphal letter from
ral Asia has Mani write to Mar Ammo that the faithful should
tice meditation and strive to acquire merit.[54]

Although the Uighur court in eastern Turkestan championed
ichaeism for nearly five centuries, probably only a minority of their
ect population became Manichaeans. Some remained Nestorian,
many more eventually embraced Mahayana Buddhism. The texts
paintings from the Turfan oasis, especially, show a mixing of the
e traditions to an extent that often verges on the bizarre. The "Great

Hymn to Mani" which has been preserved in Turkish is a good example:

> We have prepared ourselves with hearts full of praise to praise you,
> My praiseworthy, honorable father, my Mani Buddha . . .
> You have taken nescience from the living beings in the five forms of existence,
> You have brought them wisdom.
> You have let them partake of *parinirvana.*
> Hate and many other passions had perturbed their senses and their minds
> When you, our holy father, came down from the Firmament . . .
> You have erected the ladder of wisdom,
> And overcoming the five forms of existence you have saved us . . .
> We, the miserable sentient beings . . . came to see the Buddha-like Sun-God [Jesus], equal to thee.
> Bound in fetters, enduring pain, we remain in this *samsara.*
> [But] you have preached the true, incomparable doctrine to those bound to transient joys and you have led them to good *Nirvana* . . .
> You have shown them the way leading to the Buddha-realms.
> You have heaped up a Sumeru mountain of good deeds . . .
> When you found the unredeemed sentient beings, you saved them all without exception.
> Awakened beings like us you have thoroughly taught the gem of the gospel-teaching.[55]

A Sogdian hymn mentions "the five assemblies of the five Buddhas of Mahayana,"[56] clearly another conscious attempt on the part of the Manichaeans to speak the language of the eastern Silk Road. A Parthian text from Turfan includes the exhortation, "Awake, brethren, chosen ones, on this day of spiritual salvation the fourteenth of the month of Mihr, when Jesus, the Son of God, entered into *parinirvana.*"[57] The Christian term "crucifixion" and the Buddhist term "*parinirvana*" were interchangeable to the eastern Manichaeans; both referred to the liberation of Jesus' soul from the body of matter and its return to the Realm of Light.[58]

The increasing influence of Buddhism on the Uighur Manichaeans is markedly visible in a Buddhist-style *pothi* (palm-leaf) book from Bezeklik in the Turfan oasis probably dating to the eleventh century, which includes a colophon on the transfer of merit. Also included is the story of a merchant named Arazan, reflecting the identification of Manichaeism with Silk Road businessmen.[59]

In at least one significant case this mixing up of religious ideas was carried back west along the Silk Road to Europe. One of the most popular medieval European tales was the story of Barlaam and Ioasaph, a much-recolored account of the life of the Buddha. Through a series of translations, the name of the hero was transformed from the Sanskrit *bodhisattva,* to the Sogdian Budasaf, to the Uighur Bodhisaf and back again through Iudasaf to Ioasaf.[60]

In China, too, evidence of conceptual sycretism is abundant. The famous ten-foot-high eighth-century Nestorian monument in Xian is topped by a Maltese cross resting on a Taoist cloud with a Buddhist lotus flower beneath it.[61] The text inscribed below summarizes the essence of Christianity in heavily Buddhist-flavored terms and images (e.g., "the eight cardinal virtues," echoing the Noble Eightfold Path, "hanging up the bright sun," and "an oar of the vessel of mercy," a reference to Amitabha ferrying souls to paradise), along with a sprinkling of Confucianism ("how to rule both families and kingdoms") and Taoism (the "New Teaching of Non-assertion"):

> Fulfilling the old Law as it was declared by the twenty-four Sages, He (the Messiah) taught how to rule both families and kingdoms according to His own great Plan. Establishing His New Teaching of Non-assertion which operates silently through the Holy Spirit, another person of the Trinity, He formed in man the capacity for well-doing through the Right Faith. Setting up the standard of the eight cardinal virtues, He purged away the dust from human nature and perfected a true character. Widely opening the Three Constant Gates, He brought Life to light and abolished Death. Hanging up the bright Sun, He

> swept away the abodes of darkness. All the evil devices of the devil were thereupon defeated and destroyed. He then took an oar in the Vessel of Mercy and ascended to the Palace of Light. Thereby all rational beings were conveyed across the Gulf. His mighty work being thus completed, He returned at noon to His original position (in Heaven). The twenty-seven standard works of His Sutras were preserved. The Great means of Conversion (or leavening, i.e., transformation) were widely extended, and the sealed Gate of the Blessed Life was unlocked. His Law is to bathe with water and with the Spirit, and thus to cleanse from all vain delusions and to purify men until they regain the whiteness of their nature.

A few lines further down the imagery becomes more pronouncedly Taoist:

> But, at any rate, The Way would not have spread so widely if it had not been for the Sage, and the Sage would not have been so great if it were not for The Way. Ever since the Sage and The Way were united together as the two halves of an indentured deed would agree, then the world became refined and enlightened.[62]

An earlier (641?) Christian text in Chinese bears the very Indian-sounding title *The Shastra on One Deva* (or "Discourse on the Oneness of God").[63] In another early text (from 638—written by A-lo-pen?), known as the *Jesus-Messiah Sutra,* is found the following passage, very much expressed in Chinese imagery: "Jehovah, who is Lord of Heaven . . . is like the wind in His countenance. And, who could possibly see the wind? . . . The Lord of Heaven is incessantly going all over the world, is constantly present everywhere. . . . On account of this, every man existing in this world only obtains life and continues his existence by the strength of the Lord of Heaven. . . ."[64] The *Jesus-Messiah Sutra* also mentions "Buddhas, Kinnaras, and Superintending Devas," perhaps an attempt to translate the concept of "angels, archangels, and hosts of heaven."[65]

A well-known early-ninth-century Manichaean text in Chinese begins and ends like a Buddhist sutra. In fact, its conclusion is virtually identical with that of the Diamond Sutra. The Manichaean version reads: "Then, all the members of the great assembly, having heard the *sutra* accepted it with faith and rejoicing, and proceeded to put it into practice." The Diamond Sutra likewise concludes: "all the monks and nuns, lay-brothers and lay-sisters . . . having heard the Buddha's words rejoiced with one accord, and accepting them with faith, proceeded to put them into practice."[66]

To ordinary people, unequipped to sift through doctrinal subtleties, this religious mish-mash often must have been quite confusing. One Chinese text offers the following advice: "Talking about accepting Buddha, one should think of converting to *which* Buddha; not Mani Buddha, not to Nestorian Buddha, nor Zoroastrian Buddha, but Sakyamuni Buddha. . . ."[67]