

Unit 7

The Spread of Religions

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

How did Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread across the world, and why are they practiced so far from their origins?

Question 2.

How did these three major world religions change and adapt to diverse cultural circumstances?

Question 3.

Why did Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam emerge when and where they did?

Question 4.

How did Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam interact with, provide justification for, and conflict with various states and empires in Afro-Eurasia?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

As Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread across the borders and frontiers of Afro-Eurasia, they integrated diverse peoples by means of a common religion.

How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

The spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam introduced new beliefs and practices to a wide variety of peoples. These beliefs and practices were often quite different from indigenous religions. In addition, indigenous beliefs and practices often changed the new religions as they adapted to local conditions. These changes frequently resulted in the development of different sects within the new religions.

Unit Purpose

- Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread across borders and frontiers as a result of missionaries, pilgrims, and trade.
- Each of these three major world religions changed over time, and all served as elements of change in the societies where they were introduced.

- Conversion to the three major world religions was facilitated by the ability of each to adapt to local circumstances.

Unit Content Overview

The three major world religions — Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam — changed over time and were transmitted across cultures. This unit explores how missionaries, pilgrims, and converts served as elements of change by facilitating the transmission of diverse beliefs and practices between the second and twelfth centuries CE. During that time, believers spread their faith to rulers of diverse states as well as to merchants, travelers, and local communities who adopted and promoted the new religions.

As religions moved across space, they also changed. Some of this change occurred when religious leaders interpreted doctrine differently in different historical contexts. Change also occurred as a result of influence from indigenous religions; for example, as Buddhist beliefs were translated into the Chinese cultural context, they were influenced and shaped by earlier Taoist beliefs. At other times, change occurred as a result of adaptation, such as when Buddhist monks adopted the local deities of northwestern China into the pantheon of Buddhist beliefs. In Islam, too, Sufi mystics spread a message designed to appeal to ordinary people and to incorporate pre-existing indigenous beliefs. The practice of adapting to a variety of local contexts was, indeed, one of the reasons behind the extraordinary success of all three religions. Each of the three major world religions transformed as a result of encountering different peoples and cultures, and all of them have evolved over time. Transformations as a result of missionaries, pilgrims, and converts have continued into the modern era. These people have been critical to maintaining their parent religions as organic institutions — and as religions in motion.

Unit References

Jerry H. Bentley, "Missionaries, Pilgrims, and the Spread of World Religions," in *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Richard Eaton, *Islamic History as Global History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1990).

Valerie Hansen, "The Path of Buddhism into China: The View from Turfan," *Asia Major* 3rd series, 11, no. 2 (1998): 37–66.

Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

Jonathan Walters, *Finding Buddhists in Global History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1998).

Sally Wriggins, *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim Along the Silk Road* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 600 BCE–1200 CE

- All of the world's great religions have spread far and wide from their origins. In the pre-modern era, this process was one of world history's most important stories, as religions helped establish connections between many societies. Buddhism emerged in south Asia in the sixth century BCE. Around the same time, Confucius began his ethical teachings in China and the Greek philosophers imagined a new way of ordering society. By 200 BCE Buddhism had spread to China, and in the next several centuries it spread by maritime routes to Southeast Asia. As Buddhism was linking Southeast Asia to China, Christianity was beginning to spread in the Mediterranean. By 600 CE, Christianity had spread through western Europe and Africa, just as Islam was emerging and beginning to spread across the Arabian Peninsula.

AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economics and politics by exploring interactions between societies as religions moved across political frontiers by trade routes.
- Explores systems of social structure because Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam helped change the structure of societies wherever they spread.
- Discusses cultural and intellectual developments because these three religions shaped the intellectual and cultural environments of the societies where they originated, as well as the societies to which they spread.

Related Units

- Unit 5. Early Belief Systems: How did people begin to understand themselves in relation to the natural world and to the unseen realms beyond? How was religion a community experience? In this unit, animism and shamanism in Shinto are contrasted with the philosophical and ethical systems of early Greece and China, as well as the beginnings of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Judaism. It is related to Unit 7 because it provides the context in which Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam emerged.
- Unit 9. Connections Across Land: How were land-based trade routes conduits of both commerce and culture? The Eurasian Silk Roads, the Trans-Saharan Gold Roads, and the Meso-American Turquoise Road trace the transmission of commodities, religions, and diseases, as well as the movements of people. This unit is related to Unit 7 because it demonstrates the ways the major world religions were transmitted from place to place by trade routes.
- Unit 12. Transmission of Traditions: What are traditions and how are they transmitted? Islamic Spain, Korea, and West Africa provide examples of many different modes of transmission, including oral, written, artistic, and architectural. This unit is related to Unit 7 because it documents an example of the spread of a world religion — in this case, Islam — to Spain.
- Unit 26. World History and Identity: How have global forces redefined both individual and group identities in the modern world? This unit examines the transnational identity that emerged from the Chinese diaspora, and compares it to the newly redefined national Chechen identity forged through war with Russia. It is related to Unit 7 because it explores the ways that a world religion — in this case, Islam — can be transformed under the impact of globalization.

Section 2

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment 1: Buddhism

In northern India in the late-sixth century BCE, the prince Siddhartha came to believe that humans could find release from the endless cycle of birth and death — samsara — through spiritual realization. He became known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One, and developed a devoted following. This segment explores how and why Buddhism spread across Asia in the millennium after the Buddha's death. When the Buddha died, his followers began to spread his teachings beyond the confines of northern India by trade routes to the east and west. One of the reasons so many people accepted his teachings was the willingness of Buddhist monks to incorporate local beliefs and adapt them to Buddhist beliefs. Buddhism also spread with the help of written texts. When these texts were translated into other languages, though, their meanings were often subtly changed to suit culturally specific concepts. The adaptability of Buddhism won many converts, who increasingly wanted to make pilgrimages to visit the land where the Buddha had lived. Some of these, like the Chinese monk Xuanzang, brought important texts and artifacts back from their pilgrimages and, once they returned home, were influential in spreading the religion among their own people. Indeed, over time Buddhism became firmly rooted in China — so much so that China itself became an important center for the transmission of Buddhism to other parts of east and southeast Asia.

Video Segment 2: Christianity

This segment explores the historical context for the spread of Christianity, a religion that taught compassion, morality, spiritual immortality, and devotion to God. It began six centuries later than Buddhism, and then spread to parts of Eurasia and Africa over the next millennium. Like Buddhism, Christianity found appeal among many diverse peoples because of its ability to adapt to and incorporate local traditions, beliefs, and sacred spaces. While small, scattered groups of Christians existed in Eurasia and Africa after Jesus's death, Christianity did not receive official state support until the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in 312 CE. Christianity then spread rapidly by trade routes in Europe, Asia, and North Africa, aided by a booming traffic in relics associated with Jesus and the saints. Christian rulers like Charlemagne in the eighth century were also responsible for the aggressive spread of Christianity in the areas they conquered. In 968, Prince Vladimir of Russia converted to Christianity, and then proceeded to baptize the entire population of Kiev. By the end of the first millennium CE, nearly all of Europe had converted to Christianity.

Video Segment 3: Islam

Six centuries after the beginning of Christianity, Islam began in the Arabian Peninsula. This segment looks at the rapid spread of Islam in Eurasia and Africa in the centuries following its origins, and the reasons diverse peoples found the new faith so appealing. Islam began in 610 CE when Muhammad, an Arabian merchant, received a vision commanding him to establish a godly community, to preach morality, and to warn people that Judgment Day was at hand. These teachings were gathered in the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, which provided guidance for both individuals and communities. In just a few years after Muhammad's death, Muslim armies had conquered a huge empire in Eurasia and North Africa. While the majority of the empire's inhabitants did not immediately convert to Islam, these areas became more uniformly Muslim by the twelfth century CE. Muslims also spread the faith to new areas by trade and missionaries. Missionaries — known as Sufis — spread out along trade routes, adapted the message of Islam to local contexts, and brought a spiritual, mystic interpretation of Islam to ordinary people. As in the case of Buddhism, Muslim pilgrims who visited the holy sites of Islam brought renewed faith, teachings, and texts back to their homelands, aiding the spread of the faith among their own peoples.

Perspectives on the Past: Religions in Diaspora

What was the effect of diasporas — or dispersals of peoples from their homelands — on religion? Religion traveled along with diasporic communities that settled in new places. One of the earliest examples was the Jews, who brought their religion with them and practiced their faith wherever they built communities. Africans also brought their religions with them as they were forcibly moved to the Americas through the slave trade. Indeed, the religious traditions that slaves brought with them provided a source of identity and empowerment in the face of oppression. Religions that move with diasporas tend to adopt some of the traditions of their new homes in a process known as religious syncretism.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Richard Bulliet
- Jerry H. Bentley
- Eko Noble

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- Huiji, Chinese monk biographer
- Ibn Jubayr, Muslim pilgrim
- Russian chronicler

Program Contents

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|---------------|-------------|--|
| 00:00 | 01:39 | Show tease, show opening credits |
| 01:40 | 03:30 | Program overview/introduction |
| 03:31 | 09:40 | Video Segment 1. <i>Buddhism</i> |
| 09:41 | 17:42 | Video Segment 2. <i>Christianity</i> |
| 17:43 | 24:34 | Video Segment 3. <i>Islam</i> |
| 24:35 | 26:14 | Perspectives on the Past: <i>Religions in Diaspora</i> |
| 25:15 | 28:25 | Show close and program credits |