

Religions in Contact Without Conflict

Judaism and Buddhism

On September 26, 1989, the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists, who was living in exile in India, met in New York with Jewish scholars who represented four branches of Judaism. He asked them to tell him the Jewish “secret technique” of cultural survival for a people living in diaspora. The Dalai Lama was aware that many of his followers were practicing Jews from around the world, who nevertheless found comfort and spiritual relevance in Buddhist teachings. At the time, many Tibetan Buddhists had been living in Dharamshala, India, having fled Tibet in 1959. Already, Tibetan Buddhists were assimilating to the cultures of their host country. Jews, he reasoned, had been living in a state of diaspora for nearly 2,000 years, since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. The 1989 meeting was the beginning of a dialogue that has continued among Buddhists and Jews in Asia, the United States, and Israel. But the relationship between the two cultures is not new. The history of the interaction of Buddhists and Jews is a long one.

The beginnings of Buddhism date back to the life of the historic man, Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 500–425 BCE), who was born in what is now Nepal. Called the Buddha, or “awakened one,” Siddhartha traveled around northern India, living as an ascetic and teaching a doctrine based on seeking enlightenment and inner peace. His ideas did not involve the worship of a

single god and did not draw a distinction between its adherents and other people, but rather viewed everyone as struggling for enlightenment in their own way. In the centuries after the Buddha’s death, Buddhist thought diverged into three major branches, or schools, and spread widely through southern and eastern Asia. The ex-

spread to the east to encompass all of the Middle East, North Africa, and Persia, and beyond to Afghanistan and the Indus valley. At their greatest extent, his conquests included an area greater than that of the continental United States.

As Alexander’s armies rolled through the Middle East, he was initially on good terms with the Jewish leader Simon the Just after their encounter in 329 BCE. At the time, Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah were an autonomous Jewish-run province within the Persian Empire. Simon had wisely decided not to resist Alexander’s army. As described in the Talmud (Yoma 69a), the Jewish leaders met with Alexander and negotiated a treaty that kept Jerusalem from being destroyed. Alexander’s tolerance of Judaism was not

anomalous: his usual practice was to leave local religions alone as long as they did not affect a region’s political subjugation. One of Alexander’s successors had seventy Jewish scholars translate the Hebrew bible into Greek, a translation now known as the “Septuagint,” the name reflecting the seventy translators. Many Jews served in Alexander’s army and traveled through southwest Asia with him.

Alexander’s occupation of southwest Asia also provided Jewish traders access to these areas, and it gave Buddhists access to the West. In the East, a sort of hybrid Greek-Buddhist culture emerged in what is now northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Some Buddhist precepts and ideas



The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, at his home in Dharamshala, India

pansion of Buddhist practices was strengthened by a south Asian king, Ashoka (ca.304–233 BCE), who ruled a sprawling Mauryan empire that encompassed most of northern India and Pakistan (from roughly 320 to 185 BCE). The western flank of the Mauryan empire adjoined the Middle East, which at that time was greatly influenced by Greek ideas. On the east it connected with China, and allowed for the intermixture of Buddhism with Confucian and Daoist culture and ideas.

Beyond the work of the king Ashoka, the spread of Buddhist ideas in the west was strongly influenced by the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). Exploding out of northern Greece, his conquests

SALVACAMPILLO/SHUTTERSTOCK

became part of Greek philosophy. The Old Testament contains South Asian loan words for things from that region, including monkeys, ivory, and peacocks. In the biblical *Book of Kings* and the *Mahosadha Jataka*—a book of tales about the Buddha’s past lives—there are nearly identical stories of a wise king having to make a judgement as to which of two women is a baby’s mother. Some Buddhist ideas also found their way into early Christianity. Later, in the seventh century CE, there are documents by Nestorian Christians from Xi’an, China—called Jingjiao Documents, or “Jesus Sutras”—that combine ideas from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Alexander’s empire splintered after his death in 323 BCE, leaving Greek-inflated polities behind, which included communities of Jewish merchants who acted as a trade and communication network.

The Roman conquest of the Middle East and the destruction of a Jewish state in 70 CE further drove a diaspora of Jews out into the Roman Empire, and after the fall of Rome these trading communities endured.

From an account by the Persian geographer Ibn Khordadbeh (ca. 820–912 CE), who lived in Baghdad, we have some insight into how a network of Jewish communities prospered. Around 870 CE, he wrote *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* (*Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*), in which he describes a network of Jewish trading communities known as the Radhanites. In fact Ibn Khordadbeh got much of the book’s information on faraway lands from these Jewish traders, especially those who had been in



Shaka Nyorai, ca.1850-1925, Japanese Buddhist art from The Elizabeth Anna Gordon Collection at the National Library of Israel

China, Japan, and Korea. *The Book of Roads* offers a snapshot of Eurasia at that time and provides an understanding of how the network of Jewish traders worked. Their trade goods included silk, spices, medicines, drugs, furs, jewels, fine weapons, books, perfumes, and anything valuable enough to justify the cost of carrying it across Asia. At times, they also traded human captives, transporting enslaved people in both directions.

Another factor enabling the Radhanites’ success was the expansion of Islamic religion and political organization from its origins in the Arabian peninsula beginning about 600 CE. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570-632 CE), Arab groups spread out in a period of rapid growth

comparable to Alexander’s conquests. By 722 CE, Muslims had captured all of North Africa, Iberia, and had advanced as far as the city of Tours in central France, 200 kilometers from Paris. In the other direction, they conquered all of the Middle East, including Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, modern Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia. Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Druze, and other religions were allowed to live in the Islamic states, and in many cases Jews and Christians outnumbered Muslims. Jews played an important role in the trade between the often-hostile Islamic and Christian regions because they were able to act as neutral brokers, carrying precious goods between the two territories. The same relationship of neutrality gave them access to groups to the east as well—to Buddhists, Hindus, and the people of China and East Asia. They did not have a monopoly on this trade, but played a role that was beneficial to the trading parties.

When Marco Polo (1254–1324) was traveling in Asia, he reported the presence of Jewish communities in many places he went, including Beijing. Marco Polo describes a battle of Kublai Khan (1215–1294), the ruler of China, against Nayan (1257–1287), another Mongol prince who objected to Kublai Khan’s assimilation into Chinese ways. Polo offers a striking description of how the Great Khan rode into battle, and mentions that he had both Jews and Muslims fighting in his army:

“Kublai took his station in a large wooden castle, borne on the backs of four elephants, whose bodies were protected with coverings of thick leather hardened by fire, over which were housings of cloth of gold. The castle contained many crossbow-men and archers, and on the top of it was hoisted the imperial standard, adorned with representations of the sun and moon.”



VLADISLAV GURFINKEL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Bas-relief on the Arch of Titus shows Roman loot, including the menorah, from the destroyed Second Temple in Jerusalem, 70 CE

The Khan was successful in this battle and afterwards paid respects to the deities or leaders of Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Christians. Feeling it wise to cover all his bases, he noted, “I do honour and show respect to all the four, and invoke to my aid whichever amongst them is in truth supreme in heaven.”

The great Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1369) was another witness to the interaction of Jews and Buddhists in central Asia. He describes visiting Hangzhou, the largest city in the world at the time, and in one precinct of the city he found Christians, Jews,

Buddhists, Muslims, and Turks. He describes this district as the most prosperous and beautiful part of the city of over a million people. Despite his prejudices against Jews and Christians, he comments on the well-functioning community and says that he entered Hangzhou through the “Jews’ gate.”

Both Judaism and Buddhism have proved to be remarkably resilient in the twenty-three centuries since

their first encounters: each group evolved, changed, and experienced both periods of acceptance and growth, and brutal repression. Monasteries and priestly communities helped preserve the teachings and sacred religious documents of each group. Today Buddhism survives as a dominant philosophy mostly north and east of India, in Tibet, Mongolia, China, southeast Asia, Japan, and Sri Lanka. In many of the areas that were once predominantly Buddhist, Buddhists have been pushed aside by the expansion of Hindu and Muslim religious practices.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews have been particularly receptive to Buddhist philosophy. There are no theological reasons to prohibit Jews from incorpo-



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Detail of one of the Copper Plates of Cochin, granting Jews license to trade

rating Buddhist ideas and practices into their lives. A Buddhist priest from Sri Lanka named Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) began to teach about Buddhism to Jews in Chicago in the late 1800s. He became active in the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 in New York. The group—dissatisfied with Western religions and interested in esoteric and occult ideas—described itself as “an unsectarian body of seekers after Truth, who endeavor to promote Brotherhood and strive to serve humanity.”

Buddhism itself has changed, especially in the last 150 years. Through the work of Dharmapala and others like him there emerged a “Buddhist Modernism,” which has tried to make itself more accessible to the Western world, de-emphasizing some aspects of Buddhist cosmology, ritual, icon worship, and emphasis on a priestly hierarchy. This modernist movement has increased in extent and influence, especially in the United States and especially with Jews. A major factor that seems to foster a close relationship between Jews and Buddhists is the lack of a history of animosity against one another. And they have similarities—for instance, both have mystical sub-traditions in Jewish Kabbala and Buddhist Tantra

The United States is often described as a “melting pot,” wherein ethnic minorities maintain their distinct identity for a while, but through time (often to the distress of the first generation of immigrants) their descendants take on the lifestyle, language, customs, and self-identification of the majority culture. However, as both Jews and Buddhists demonstrate, this does not happen in all cases. Around the world there are many groups who have maintained their distinct cultural identities for centuries. Examples include the Romani people of Europe, who originated in northwest India around 1000

CE. They traveled in several waves of migration into Europe, and beyond to North America and Brazil, while maintaining their identity and language. Another set of groups with a long history of independence are the Anabaptists,



The Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in Yangon, Burma

Christian sects which split from the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. They include the Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, and German groups of Brethren. At present, they have populations of tens to hundreds of thousands in North, Central, and South America, Europe, Africa, India, southeast Asia, and Indonesia. The Basque people from the Spanish-French borderlands have remained separate for millennia, along with other language isolates such as the Ainu of Japan and the Sámi, indigenous people of northern Scandinavia.

Why do some groups maintain their cultural identities? Sometimes it has to do with being forced into residen-

tial communities, as with European Jewish ghettos dating back more than a thousand years. Emphasis on language maintenance is also important, as seen with the Basque, who kept the Basque language alive even when its use was outlawed. Language maintenance also helps unify widely separated peoples, as with Muslims from many language groups who learn Arabic to read the Quran, or Jews who learn Hebrew to read the Torah, Talmud, and Haggadah. Paradoxically, some degree of outside hostility and persecution helps strengthen in-group coherence. Obviously, outside persecution can also be catastrophic for minority groups, as when acts of hatred directed at these groups becomes genocidal.

At the meeting of Jewish leaders with the Dalai Lama in 1989, one thing that was seen as important to cultural survival was that key Jewish rituals are carried out in the home, rather than in a communal space—the Shabbat meal on Friday evening, the Passover seder, shiva as a prescribed mourning period, bris and brit bat welcoming newborns, and others. Religious practices can thereby be continued, regardless of the ability to build a special structure for the purpose.

At the meeting, however, there was considerable debate among the Jews, some of it heated, over what other factors accounted for their cultural survival. The orthodox rabbi Irving Greenberg said to the Buddhist holy man, “You’ve just learned one of the keys to Jewish survival: we disagree with each other all the time!” “No we don’t!” quipped the reform rabbi Lawrence Kushner, and the Dalai Lama laughed and nodded.

Samuel M. Wilson is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Texas, author of The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact, and a contributing editor to Natural History.