

Review - Religions of the Silk Road

Written by Luke M. Herrington

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, APR 18 2012

Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization
By Richard Foltz
Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

Richard Foltz's *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* illuminates the history of the trans-Eurasian trade-network remembered today for the Chinese silk that once filled its caravans.[1] Originally published in 1999 with a different subtitle, Foltz has culled together many different sources to look at the histories of Central Asia, the Silk Road, globalization, trans-Eurasian trade, and religion through a broad interdisciplinary lens. Foltz, the founding director of Concordia University's Iranian studies program, will keep readers engaged, especially given the slim size of his thought provoking book. Unfortunately, its brevity also ensures that Foltz's second edition cannot be anything more than a topical introduction. Just consider the 2500-plus years covered by the book: it ensures a wide river with only minimal depth.

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The Zoroastrian Diaspora

In the context of premodern globalization, for example, Foltz's look at Zoroastrianism—one of the world's oldest religious traditions—would be more complete if he had discussed the Parsi religious community. The Parsis are a group of Zoroastrians that fled Persia by sea, via what might be dubbed the maritime silk route, after Arab conquerors brought Islam to the region. Foltz discusses Khurasan, a region of eastern Iran, on plenty of occasions, even noting that it served as a base for Muslim armies during the eighth century (15, 30). However, Zoroastrians took refuge in the mountains there long before, and they were able to practice their faith freely for another hundred years. Foltz also overlooks that the Parsis eventually fled Persia—taking their religion with them—to the island of Dui off the coast of the Gujarat region in India sometime between A.D. 716 and 936. A few years later, the Parsis sailed to Gujarat itself, where they eventually adopted the local language, and became some of the most successful entrepreneurs in India by facilitating trade between Gujarat and other Iranians. To this day, they comprise a significant community in Bombay.[2]

Globalization, No Modern Phenomenon

One of the more significant aspects of the new edition is its treatment of globalization. Though some are skeptical of this,[3] Foltz has created a far more nuanced study. In doing so, he confronts the typical assumption that globalization is a modern phenomenon. For instance, famed *New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman, used to argue that globalization only occurred twice in history: after the Cold War, and prior to World War I.[4] Of course, Friedman's view has evolved, but he's still only willing to admit that the processes of globalization began in 1492—a Western-centric perspective—with the onset of the Great Discoveries.[5] However, Reza Aslan asserts that there is “a compelling case to be made for considering the process of globalization to have begun when the first humans footslogged out of Africa.” Moreover, religion has historically been among the most prominent and powerful forces driving globalization. After all, religion, says Aslan, “has always sought to spread its message across the boundaries of borders, clans, and ethnicities.”[6] Thankfully, Foltz recognizes the need to understand “premodern patterns of globalization,” but his argument would have been strengthened had he actually engaged with thinkers such as Aslan and Friedman.

Foltz also should have turned to Janet L. Abu-Lughod, especially given his treatment of the Mongolian Empire (105-126). Her book, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, also looks at trans-Eurasian trade and commerce. Abu-Lughod's focus on the stability the Mongolian Empire brought to Eurasia could easily enhance Foltz's treatment of the *Pax Mongolica*. Of course, it is possible that he ignored Abu-Lughod because she could not make a substantive contribution to his rich dialogue on religion. Being the primary theme of his book, this is forgivable. However, Abu-Lughod certainly could have improved his discussion of globalization.

After all, globalization is Foltz's secondary theme, but treatment of the subject is borderline superficial. In the decade since *Religions of the Silk Road*'s first publication, he really only added a two-and-a-half page epilogue (137-139) discussing the almost religious nature of free market capitalism (i.e. the religion of the market). This discussion could be more complex, and could actually be incorporated into the final chapter if a third edition is ever published. Hopefully, this will help readers learn how globalization has not only created a secular religion of the market, but also a marketplace for religion, wherein individuals have the ability to shop around for their faith. It would be interesting if this—and a brief discussion of religious liberty—was also placed within the Central Asian context of his narrative so that readers might become more familiar with the true dearth of pluralism that now exists there, and the role the religions of the Silk Road played in the creation of this homogenous environment.[7] Of course, Foltz alludes to this in the final chapter, “A Melting Pot No More” (127-136), but it should be expanded upon.

Questions for Further Exploration

Furthermore, readers ought to be amused by Foltz's depiction of scheming Buddhist, Nestorian, and Taoist monks at the Mongolian imperial court. They should also highlight the relationship he exposes between religious proliferation and trade, especially among the Arabs, whose conquests were more an accident of economics than a product of religious fervor (86-87). Especially given what is taking place today in that part of the world, from China to the Middle

Review - Religions of the Silk Road

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East, *Religions of the Silk Road* is a must read.[8] It will surely leave readers with an appetite for more, as Foltz's analysis provokes many questions: why did a region that was once the most thriving cultural melting pot in the world become home to one of the most homogenous Islamic communities in the world?; what lessons in pluralism can modern societies take away from the old empires of the Silk Road?; how might the world have been different if the Mongolian Empire and Christendom successfully united in an effort to defeat Islam during the crusades?[9]

Conclusion

Chronologically speaking, the chapters are well constructed with an eye toward historical progression. Foltz might have taken time, on the other hand, to have inserted more dates. Not that the next edition should be riddled with dates after every name, or every event, as this would make it far too cumbersome and choppy, but it would help the unfamiliar student to place his narrative into a more rigid historical context. Moreover, from the second edition was removed a list of Chinese transliterations that probably should have remained. Additionally, more informative maps could have been included throughout the text. Especially given Foltz's references to unfamiliar cities and regions, this could provide greater geographical and physical context that will serve only to enhance Foltz's narrative.

Should Foltz decide to write a follow up, or at the very least, should a third edition of *Religions of the Silk Road* be commissioned, hopefully he will address the suggestions noted above. But, for now, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* stands alone—and it stands tall.

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[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Jeannie Herrington, Hal E. Wert, and Dennis Hoover for reading early drafts of this review. I am also thankful to Parveen Mozaffar, who first introduced me to the history of the Parsis.

[2] Dosabhai Framji Karaka, *History of the Parsis* (London, England: Macmillan and Company, 1884), 23-28; and Sooni Taraporevala, *Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India: A Photographic Journey* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2004).

[3] See, for example, T. H. Barrett, Review of *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, by Richard Foltz, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 74.1 (2011).

[4] Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York, New York: Anchor Books, 2000), xvi-xvii.

[5] Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York, New York: Macmillan, 2007), 9-10; and Thomas Friedman, "It's a Flat World, After All," *New York Times Magazine*, 3 April 2005; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/03DOMINANCE.html?pagewanted=all&position=> (accessed 9 September 2011).

[6] Aslan may suggest that globalization began with the great migrations of humanity out of Africa, but Hugh Liebert regards Alexander the Great—whose empire spread Hellenistic culture from Europe to India more than two thousand years ago—as the "founder" of globalization. Foltz does not pay much attention to Alexander's place in the history of the Silk Road, but maybe in light of Liebert's presentation, this could change. Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in the Age of Globalization* (New York, New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 18; and Hugh Liebert, "Alexander the Great and the History of Globalization," *The Review of Politics* 73 (2011): 536.

Review - Religions of the Silk Road

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[7] Friedman shows that homogenization is a basic byproduct of globalization throughout *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Foltz aptly discusses the Islamization (read: homogenization) of the silk road (85-104), arguing that the “mass cultural conversion” of Central Asia was caused by the spread of Islam’s political power, Arab hegemony in trans-Eurasian trade, and the missionary efforts of Sufi preachers (91-92). He even discusses the integration of Muslim and Chinese culture at the eastern-most end of the Silk Road (102).

[8] Currently, the world is witnessing a resurgence in religion, the possible decline of one superpower and the rise of another, terrorism, war, and fundamentalism. It might be said there is something for everyone in *Religions of the Silk Road* related to each of these phenomena.

[9] Though this is a counterfactual subject to debate, according to Graham E. Fuller’s *A World Without Islam* (2010), not much would have changed.

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