READING 1

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in World History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), selections from chapter 5, "Religion and State: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam."

Abstract: This essay focuses on the development of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as institutionalized religions, their relationships with rulers of states and empires, and their influence on societies in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are sometimes referred to as universal religions, belief systems that transcended the particular cultures and societies where they began and spread across vast regions of the globe. As universal religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam crossed geographic, political, and cultural boundaries; over time, each developed a power structure that interacted with secular states in Asia, Europe, and Africa, sometimes dominating them.

Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam arose in the same geographic and cultural setting: West Asia. Both drew from the ancient traditions of that region, particularly that of the Jewish people and Judaism (see Chapter 4). Despite the dispersal of the Jewish people, their religion survived both in its own right and as a profound influence on the development of Christianity and Islam. Christianity came first, inspired by the life and death of its founder, the Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth (d. ca. 35 C.E.). His death and resurrection (restoration to life), according to Christian belief, became the mythic center of the Christian religion as it symbolized to Christians the eternal life of those who followed the Christian faith. The name of the religion is drawn from the appellation Christ, Greek for the Hebrew "Messiah," which means "anointed." Five hundred years later, Islam, which means "submission to the will of God," was founded by the prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632 C.E.). Believers in Islam also regarded Jesus as a prophet, though Muhammad was believed to be the ultimate prophet of God, known in Islam as Allah.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India during the sixth century B.C.E., and its founding figure, Buddha, was a contemporary of Confucius in China and the early Greek philosophers, antedating Jesus by 500 years and Muhammad by a millennium. Buddhism was rooted in early Indian cosmology and adapted concepts such as *dharma*, "duty" in the Upanishads and the "fundamental law of the universe" in Buddhism, to its own ends. By the beginning of the first millennium C.E., however, the influence of Buddhism waned in its South

Asian homeland as it began to spread from India to East and Southeast Asia, where it gained many followers and became a potent cultural, social, and even political force.

Religion and State

Like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism was a proselytizing religion: Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims all tried to convert others to their beliefs. Also like Christianity and Islam, Buddhism was at times patronized by rulers and became entangled in the politics of states in South, East, and Southeast Asia. But Buddhism did not become the kind of political force that both Christianity and Islam did, inspiring conquest and empire. Chinese emperors, for example, patronized Buddhism as a means of strengthening their rule by gaining the favor of the Buddhist clergy and lay believers, but the fundamental structure of the Chinese state was sanctioned by the political ideology of Confucianism rather than Buddhism. In contrast, Christianity and Islam both shaped the governments that supported and propagated them. In the case of Christianity, it was the heirs of the Roman Empire, such as the Byzantine and Carolingian Empires, that both promoted and were influenced by Christianity. The papacy (government of the Roman Catholic church led by the pope) became a political force in its own right. In the Islamic world, Islam provided the laws by which empires were governed, as well as the justification for conquest.

As they spread through West Asia, Africa, and Europe, Christianity and Islam encountered other belief systems and cultures, which were variously absorbed and adapted by Christian and Islamic rulers. Buddhism similarly engaged the religious beliefs and cultural ideals of the societies its missionaries penetrated. In contrast to the monotheistic background of Christianity and Islam, Buddhism grew in a cultural and philosophical environment that recognized the coexistence of many deities, even many different pantheons. As it spread from India to China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, it encountered and adapted to many different cultures, changing them as Buddhism itself was transformed by exposure to these cultures. In this chapter, we trace Buddhism's expansion into East Asia and its relationship to political forces in that region of the world. We then follow the rise of Christianity and Islam from a common background, along with the political expression of Christianity and Islam in the form of empires.

Buddhism, State, and Society in East Asia

By the beginning of the first century C.E., Buddhist missionaries were carrying Buddhist beliefs and practices beyond India to East and Southeast Asia. Before its transmission beyond the frontiers of India, Buddhism had divided into Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") and Thera-vada ("Doctrine of the Elders")

traditions. Mahayana Buddhists emphasized universal salvation through devotional practices accessible to lay believers. This contrasted with the Thera-vada (also known pejoratively as Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle") concentration on the discipline of renunciation, spiritual self-cultivation, and meditation characteristic of monastic life, and the belief that only those who devoted their lives to Buddhist practice could attain enlightenment. As the goal shifted from enlightenment, at the heart of early Buddhism, to salvation in Mahayana Buddhism, there was a profound change in the fundamental orientation of Buddhist believers.

The central religious goal of Mahayana belief was that of the *bodhisattva*, one who seeks enlightenment for the purpose of aiding other beings in the pursuit of awakening, in contrast to the Theravada *arhat*, who was concerned only with individual spiritual liberation. The *bodhisattva* ideal was rooted in the altruism of Buddha in his former lives, when he sought to help other living beings, and it was represented in Mahayana Buddhism by the Buddhas and *bodhisattva*s who became the focus of worship by Mahayana believers, such as the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara or the Buddha Amitabha, both of whom became the center of sectarian Buddhist beliefs and practice in Central and East Asia. As Buddhism was transmitted from India across Asia, the Mahayana tradition came to dominate Central and East Asia, while Theravada became dominant in Southeast Asia, and these differences continue to the present day.

Buddhism in China

When the Han dynasty fell in 220 C.E., China entered a long period of political turmoil and social disorder. The Buddhist belief that life is suffering and that the world of the senses is impermanent and illusory held great appeal for people living in chaotic conditions of frequent warfare and political, social, and economic instability, making them easily susceptible to conversion. Central Asian monks translated the sutras, the sacred scriptures of Buddhism, from Sanskrit and Pali (the classical languages of South Asia) into Chinese and transmitted Indian Buddhism to an elite Chinese audience. These monks were transcultural heroes who dedicated their lives and talents to the propagation of Buddhism; their translation projects produced thousands of pages of sacred texts in Chinese. Often these monks were patronized by the non-Chinese rulers of the nomadic peoples who invaded and conquered north China during the three centuries following the fall of the Han dynasty.

Chinese Buddhist Sects

Though all sutras (Buddhist sacred texts) were supposed to be the teachings of Buddha, in fact they were highly inconsistent in the doctrines they taught, and this gave rise to differing sectarian traditions within Chinese Buddhism.

One of the most important sectarian developments was the Pure Land school, said to have originated with a devotional cult to the Buddha Amitabha established by the learned cleric Huiyuan. Although the Pure Land school is drawn from a sutra of the same name, the sutra that became the principal doctrinal source for Pure Land believers was the Lotus Sutra. The Pure Land school preaches the efficacy of complete faith in the precepts of Buddhism to attain salvation and practices worship of the Buddha Amitabha and the *bodhisattva* Avalo-kiteshvara, or Guanyin in Chinese. These two deities preside over the Western Paradise, the "Pure Land," where believers seek to go to attain enlightenment with the aid of Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara. The Pure Land school reached a far wider audience than did more text-based, scholastic doctrines, such as that of the Heavenly Platform school.

The Heavenly Platform school, dating from the latter sixth century, attempted to reconcile and synthesize the earlier Buddhist traditions into one by arguing that each represented a different level of truth. The ultimate truth, of course, was the Heavenly Platform. Another distinctively Chinese sect was Chan ("Meditation"), which originated during this early period from the teachings of a monk who stressed the potential of even nonbelievers to attain salvation and the possibility of instantaneous enlightenment. The development of the Chan sect in China was heavily influenced by Daoism and better known in the modern West by its Japanese name, Zen. Practitioners of Chan sought individual enlightenment through a variety of methods, principally by lengthy meditation or by means of intellectual techniques such as a riddle or puzzle designed to break down normal rational intellectual processes in order to achieve enlightenment.

Buddhism and the Confucian State in China

By the sixth century C.E., Buddhism was thoroughly integrated into Chinese culture, and believers could be found at all levels of society. When China was reunified in the latter sixth century by the founder of the Sui dynasty (589–617 C.E.), he made use of both Buddhist and Confucian sources of legitimacy for claiming the right to rule. He declared that he had received the Confucian Mandate of Heaven, but he also laid claim to the Buddhist ideal of the *chakravartin* ruler, as shown at the beginning of this chapter. The Sui was swiftly displaced by a new dynasty, the Tang (618–907 C.E.), which inaugurated an era of great cultural flourishing and imperial expansion in east Asia. Like their predecessors, the founding emperors of Tang laid claim to the Mandate of Heaven, but they also made use of Buddhism to support their rule. One of the most famous ruler patrons of Buddhism was the Empress Wu (r. 690–705 C.E.), who claimed power after the death of her husband and who used Buddhism to promote her interests. Called "Imperial Bodhisattva" by those who sought to win her favor, she had Buddhist images carved into mountains in north China to demonstrate her devotion to the

faith and thus to gain the goodwill of both powerful Buddhist clergy and aristocratic lay believers.

Both the imperial house and wealthy aristocratic families made donations to Buddhist monasteries and temples, and devout individuals took vows as monks or nuns. The Buddhist Church acquired great wealth and power as both the size and number of monastic estates and the population of monks and nuns soared during the seventh and eighth centuries. Later emperors attacked the wealth of monastic Buddhism, reclaiming lands and forcing monks and nuns to return to lay life. The suppression of Buddhism in 845 C.E. caused thousands of temples and monasteries to be razed and restored hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns to lay status.

The Spread of Buddhism in East Asia

At the height of its power in the seventh and eighth centuries, when Tang China influenced all of East Asia, Buddhism became an important conduit of Chinese cultural influence. As Buddhism lost ground in China, its fortunes began to rise elsewhere in East Asia. Buddhist missionaries went out from China to other parts of East Asia, especially Korea and, later, Japan. In the mid-sixth century C.E., the Korean peninsula was divided among three kingdoms concentrated in the northeast, northwest, and south. Korea had earlier come under the influence of Buddhism, and the Buddhist ruler of one of these kingdoms sent an image of Buddha to Japan. Gradually the scriptures of Buddhism were introduced into Japan, initially by Korean scribes and missionaries, and later by Chinese as well.

East Asian Buddhism

By around 1000 C.E., Buddhism was deeply rooted in East Asia and had undergone profound changes with the development of sectarian traditions distinctive to East Asia, such as the Chan, Heavenly Platform, and Pure Land schools. Focused on belief in salvation by faith in a savior deity, the Pure Land sects gained large followings in both China and Japan. With the development of popular sects, Buddhism penetrated all levels of society in East Asia, from the elite ruling aristocracies to the unlettered common people. The Buddhist Church played a role of economic, social, and political importance, and Buddhist priests were members of the educated establishment in China, Korea, and Japan. Buddhist monks in China engaged in welfare activities, providing charity for the poor, while the large estates that belonged to some temples and monasteries made them among the wealthiest landholders in the empire. But the Buddhist Church never challenged the state in either China or Japan, nor did Buddhist priests assume roles of political leadership, unlike Christian Church leaders in the West.

The Origins of Christianity

At the beginning of the first millennium C.E. in Palestine, then a province of the Roman Empire, a Jew named Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem. Palestine had come under Roman control about 65 B.C.E., but some Jewish groups continued to resist the Roman occupation. Jewish political activists, called "Zealots," a small minority of the Jewish population, carried out guerrilla attacks against the Roman government.

Early Christianity

The Life of Jesus

When he was about thirty years old, Jesus set out to preach reform in this Palestinian milieu of many religious beliefs and practices. He spoke against narrow reliance on ritual, attacked the legalistic and too-worldly character of community religious leaders, and again and again warned of the imminent end of the world, the resurrection of the dead, judgment, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. After three years of preaching to increasingly receptive audiences, the Romans tried Jesus on two counts: for blasphemy and for claims of being "king of the Jews." Jesus did not deny the claim of kingship, although he had never asserted it. Given the combination of armed Jewish Zealots hostile to Rome and the popular belief that the "Kingdom of God" would result from the apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, Jesus seemed very much a political danger to Roman authority in Palestine. He was convicted of the charges and executed by crucifixion around 35 C.E.

The Early Christian Community

The small community Jesus left behind could easily have collapsed or become just another separatist community like the Essenes. The issue that tested it was the question of the acceptability of Gentile (non-Jewish) membership in the community of Jesus's followers. A number of Jesus's early followers in Jerusalem refused to accept Gentiles into their community, feeling that a Gentile presence would defile what they considered Jewish worship. As a result, a division developed among the followers of Jesus, and those who would not accept the Gentiles into common worship as they believed that Jesus's message had been meant primarily or exclusively for the Jews, withdrew to worship separately from those who admitted Gentiles to worship. Following the Roman occupation of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the separate Jewish Christian community disappeared. Under the leadership of Paul, the strongest supporter of joint worship, Christianity became increasingly Gentile and expanded rapidly.

Christian Sacred Texts

Between 70 and 100 C.E., the sacred texts of Christianity were established. There were four Gospels, or "Good Stories," written in Greek by four of Jesus's apostles. These described the sayings and deeds of Jesus and spell out collectively how these sayings and deeds were to be understood. To these Gospels was added the Epistles of Paul, couched in the form of advisory letters and sermons written by him to early Christian communities in need of advice. In contrast to the more formal biographical approach of the Gospels, Paul's Epistles described his experience with Jesus and were a highly personalized and spiritual account. These texts (the "New Testament") were attached to the Judaic sacred scriptures (the "Old Testament"). While early Christians believed that the practice of Jewish law and ritual was not necessary for salvation, they clearly felt that the Old Testament was God's word and a key source of guidance.

Christian Cosmology

Christian cosmology, following the teaching of these texts and early spokesmen, was a direct descendant of West Asia's Sumerian and Judaic traditions, modified since the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E. by Hellenistic and Zoroastrian concepts. According to Zoroastrianism, a single god, transcendent and beyond material experience, created the universe and rules it. A righteous god, he was contrasted to Satan, the source of evil. War was constantly being waged between Good and Evil, with humanity choosing one side or the other. The war would end in a final apocalyptic battle, led on the side of good by a savior, the Messiah. At this apocalyptic end, all of the dead of generations past would arise to be judged by God for the good and evil of their lives. Depending on the outcome, they would dwell forever in Paradise or Hell. The result would be the establishment of the perfect Kingdom of God throughout the universe.

The role of Jesus as the Messiah in this scheme was to warn of the imminence of the day of reckoning and to encourage the leading of a moral life. This vision of the imminent apocalypse dominated the world of the first Christian communities. As time passed and the end of the world seemed less imminent, other aspects of Jesus came to the foreground. His appearance in the world, it was believed, was witness to his compassion for humanity, and Christians believed that if Jesus were "accepted into one's own heart," he would ease the sorrows of this painful world because, as the son of God who had appeared on earth and ascended to sit at the right hand of his father following his crucifixion, Jesus, Christians believed, could mediate between them and God. This approach to knowledge of God was accompanied by the emergence of a Christian sacred priesthood, an anointed elite who maintained a special

affiliation with the Divine through rituals over which they exercised the monopoly.

Christianity in the Roman Empire

At the time of its inception and early development, Christianity was not embraced by those in power to sustain and justify their social and political systems. Indeed, the Romans initially perceived Christianity as a challenge to the legitimacy of the political and social order of their empire rather than as a support for it. Later, by the fourth century C.E., as Christianity grew in strength despite official hostility and as the Roman Empire began to weaken, a powerful, mutually beneficial alliance of the Christian Church and the Roman state was formed. This became a model for subsequent European history.

The Growth and Spread of Christianity

Within a century after the death of Jesus in about 35 C.E., there were small communities of Christians strewn across Eurasia and North Africa. These communities developed from the efforts of Jesus's disciples and their followers. As Christian believers spread geographically, Christianity began to adapt to and absorb both the ideas and the practices of different cultures. The number of Christians expanded through the second and third centuries, and by the fourth century Christianity rivaled both Persian Zoroastrianism and its later manifestation, Manichaeism, in influence in West Asia.

Christianity, Community, and State

In the early fourth century C.E., the movement was given enormous encouragement by the ruler of the eastern half of the Roman empire. In 312, on the eve of a major battle, the Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337) promised to declare for the Christian god in the event he won. The victorious Constantine was true to his pledge, sanctioning Christianity by giving it legal status and favoring Christians the rest of his life. In 380 Christianity became the imperial state religion, a recognition granted it by the Emperor Theodosius. By the fifth century the secure position Christianity had achieved tended to supplement and increase imperial authority, as emperors, now resident in Constantinople, were supported by an increasingly institutionalized and powerful Christianity.

Causes of Christian Success

The social values of early Christianity also contributed to its success. Although from the formative years of the Christian movement women were regarded as inferior members of Christian society—denied the right to become priests, for example—they were accepted as members of the church. This was not the case among other contemporary religions. And, whereas

membership in some of the Gnostic cults was socially exclusive, confined to elite males, Christians came from all segments of society. Because Christianity was neither elitist nor socially exclusive, many of its adherents were poor laborers. Christian communities practiced mutual support, providing both practical and spiritual help for each other. This communal reinforcement, the sense of membership in a group with a clear purpose, was very attractive in the politically and economically difficult times of the period between 200 and 400.

Moreover, Christians quickly showed exceptional organizational skills. During the second century the distinction between clergy and laity was made clear and as the movement expanded, the clergy increased in numbers and developed hierarchical structures. A centralized and carefully organized priestly administration emerged, one unmatched by any other cult. This administrative organization enabled the church to recruit new members efficiently and to support and integrate them into the community. In the fourth century, as Christianity became the imperial religion of Rome, its organization became a mirror image of Roman imperial structures, and state and church became dependent upon each other, partners in power.

Christianity and Empire: West Asia, Northeast Africa, and Europe

The unity of the Roman world was split in two within a century of the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the empire in 380 C.E. The political capital of the Roman Empire had already been moved east to Constantinople, the new imperial city built by the Emperor Constantine at the site of Byzantium, an ancient Greek settlement on the Bosporus, which connects the Black Sea and the Mediterranean and links Europe to West Asia. The vast bureaucratic apparatus of imperial Rome reconstituted itself at Constantinople, the "Second Rome," where highly trained cadres of clerks, inspectors, and spies kept close scrutiny over the lives and possessions of the city's inhabitants. In the fourth century, as emperors became Christian, the bureaucracy served as both a support and a model for Christianity. The Christian emperors were no less divinely sanctioned theocrats then their pre-Christian predecessors, such as Diocletian (r. 284–305), but their sanction came from the Christian God. After 380, emperors ruled as "vicars of God" with religious authority equal to that of the Apostles. Caesaropapism, the absolute control of all aspects of society—religious as well as social, economic, and political—characterized the "Second Rome" for a millennium.

Though it failed in attempts (between 630 and 655) to reconquer Italy permanently and reestablish imperial control in the western Mediterranean, the eastern Roman, or Byzantine, empire produced a rich synthesis of Greek culture, Roman institutions, and Christianity. Its Christian character was

perhaps most brilliantly expressed in the great sixth-century church of Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom") with its splendid mosaics; its political sophistication was shown in the revision and codification of Roman law. A commission appointed by the Emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) undertook the task of legal codification between 529 and 565. They produced the Corpus Juris Civilis, or "Body of Civil Law," the means by which Roman law would influence later European law.

Ethiopian and Coptic Christianity in Northeast Africa

In northeast Africa, Christianity reached the Nile Valley during Roman times and the region of the middle Nile, Nubia, early in the first millennium, probably through trade and missionary connections. Evidence along the Nile suggests that Christian communities may have survived there in secrecy for many of their early years. Murals painted on walls reflect local interpretations of Monophysite doctrine, that held that Christ had only one (divine) nature, rather than two (both human and divine).

Christianity in Egypt

Monophysite Christianity in Egypt became known as the Coptic Church. The Coptic language, rather than the Greek of the elites, had been used to preach to the masses. There was another aspect of resistance in Egyptian Christianity. The history of Christianity in Egypt was bound up with the relations between Alexandria and Constantinople. Egypt officially became Christian under the Emperor Theodosius in the fifth century C.E. After the Council of Chalcedon (450 C.E.), which declared the two natures of Christ as an article of faith, a crisis was instigated in Alexandria. Bloody feuds occurred between fervent believers in the single nature of Christ (followers of the Monophysite Patriarch) and those in the Byzantine camp (led by the Constantinople-appointed Melchite Patriarch). Large numbers of believers retreated to a monastic life in communities that ultimately would have to withstand both the end of Byzantine rule and the Arab conquest in 642 C.E.

Christianity in the Middle Nile

In the middle Nile, Christianity encountered the kingdom of Kush (ca. 900 B.C.E.–400 C.E.). Pharaonic gods continued to dominate Kushite ideology until the demise of the kingdom, surviving in Kush much longer than they did in Egypt itself. Isis and Amon-Ra were most prominent of these pharaonic gods; the rulers of Napata and Meroe, the centers of Nubia's Kushite kingdom, even took the name of Amon-Ra as an element of their throne names. Rulers were personifications of gods and thus expressions of divine and secular authority.

With the advent of Christianity, the ruler was no longer divine, but it was likely that his conversion gave him trading advantages. Archaeological remains from this time no longer include royal tombs, a change suggesting that rulers' access to material wealth and spiritual power had been reduced. Instead, the Christian states of Nubia were ruled by both the local political authority and the Church, which was represented by its links to the larger, international Christian community. The Christian cross appears on buildings and coinage from this era. Replacing the early signs of divine kingship, the cross was considered an emblem of human authority and sanctioned the ruler's control over people. This control did not necessarily extend to their beliefs. The continuing use of pre-Christian cities as ceremonial and political centers in Christian times suggested how tenuous the foreign religion was and how necessary traditional links were for gaining local acceptance by later political rulers.

The early Christian period in Nubia was shaped by the decline of Meroe and Kush by the third century B.C.E. and the rise of Roman North Africa and Christian Egypt to the north. By the end of the sixth century C.E., a substantial Christian community existed in the middle Nile as three distinct kingdoms: Nobadia, Makuria, and Alodia. Excavations at the sites of Dongola and Faras have revealed multiple churches and cathedrals, as well as a Christian royal palace. Most of the sacred buildings were built of unbaked brick. Both paintings and written documents survive from this period. By 711 C.E., however, the spread of Islam would surround and isolate these Christian lands. Invasions of Egypt (641 C.E.) and north Africa (660 C.E.) by Muslim forces led to the presence of Islam that has continued to today. It would take several more centuries for the cultural impact to be felt across this vast region.

Axum

Further east, toward the Ethiopian highlands, the state of Axum was also reached by the dispersion of eastern Orthodox Christianity, this time through the Red Sea port cities. The official introduction of Christianity has been attributed to the first consecrated bishop of Axum, Frumentius of Constantinople, in 315 C.E. Frumentius received the support of the two brother kings, Abraha (Ezana in the only surviving inscription of the time) and Atsbaha. One of the primary motivations for the fourth-century conversion to Christianity by Axum's King Ezana was the trading advantage offered to Axum as a result of religious connections with the Byzantine world; status as a Christian polity conferred certain guarantees of prices and trading partners. Axum was renowned as a center of gold and other luxury-good production. Some notice of the Axumite kingdom's wealth and power was taken by classical authors such as Pliny the Elder, who mentioned the trade port of Adulis on the Red Sea around 60 C.E. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a sailing guide to the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian

Ocean, also from the first century C.E., mentions both Adulis and the city of Axum. From the time of Ezana, pilgrimages of Ethiopians to holy places in Jerusalem and Rome became common and continuous.

By the sixth century C.E., Axum stood at the axis of a giant web of trade routes reaching from the interior of the African continent to Asia and the Mediterranean. Pre-Axumite and early Axumite religions included the moon god, of south Arabian origin, and Mahrem, a god of war. Their associated symbols, the crescent moon and disc, eventually gave way to the cross, which appeared exclusively on stone stelae and coins minted from the time of Ezana. Like the inscriptions from the time of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., who claimed the support of Buddha for his kingship, inscriptions carved into stone monuments and appearing on coins during King Ezana's reign proclaimed his reliance on the new Christian religion: "I will rule the people with righteousness and justice, and will not oppress them, and may they preserve this Throne which I have set up for the Lord of Heaven." From its beginnings at Axum, the Christian state of Ethiopia survived throughout much of the second millennium C.E., in part because the mountainous terrain permitted the isolation of the Christian communities and their defense against hostile neighbors.

The Rise of Islam

Islam, the third universal religion, provides an even more powerful example of the interaction between religion and empire. Islam appeared in the seventh century C.E. in Mecca, a flourishing trade city located halfway up the Red Sea coast between Egypt and the Indian Ocean. The people of Mecca traded heavily in Indian spices, Chinese silks, and Yemeni incenses with both the Byzantine and Sasanid Persian Empires in the north. They were well aware of world politics. They were also aware of the main belief systems of West Asia. They knew Zoroastrianism through trading contacts in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and Christianity through trading trips north to Syria and Egypt or across to Christian Ethiopia. They knew something of Judaism, not only because of business but also because large numbers of Jews lived in Yemen and even closer in the agricultural town that would later be known as Medina. The Meccans were themselves believers in a south Arabian pantheon of gods and goddesses. Little is known of these early beliefs other than that they centered on the sun and moon; there were also local sacred places that were pilgrimage sites.

Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

In the year 610, one of the businessmen of Mecca, Muhammad, experienced what he later described as a vision on an evening walk in the hills outside the city. In it he was enjoined by the angel Gabriel to speak God's word, to warn

humanity of the imminent coming of the day of judgment and the need to correct greedy and immoral ways. Persuaded that he had been chosen to be a messenger of God, he dedicated the rest of his life to exhortation and action: exhortation to lead a just and moral life, action to establish a godly community in which all members accepted, or submitted to, God's plan and laws. *Islam* is the Arabic word for "acceptance" or "submission." A Muslim is one who follows Islam. The community of Muslims was to include all of humanity, not just Arabs.

In the first years, Muhammad's street-corner preaching of the coming apocalypse was ignored by most of the citizens of Mecca. His attacks, however, on the morals of the wealthy and powerful and on the false gods of Mecca and the evils of polytheism led to his persecution. Ultimately, in 622, persecution led to the migration (*hejira*) of Muhammad and his now fairly sizable group of followers to the town of Medina, 300 miles north of Mecca. There the first Muslim community was formally established. To commemorate this event, the Muslim calendar, one calculated in lunar months, begins in 622.

Establishment of Islam

Within two years, Muhammad had begun a vigorous policy of bringing the people of Mecca to God's path. Since Medina was on the caravan routes to Mecca, Muslims could interfere with trade, which was a serious threat to the primacy of Mecca in the Arab world. The leading families of Mecca gathered armies to destroy Medina and the Muslims, but their attacks failed. In 629, during the pilgrimage season, the victorious Muslims of Medina moved toward Mecca as a group, ostensibly on a pilgrimage to perform the religious rite of making a circuit around the sacred stone, the Ka'aba, which had become part of Muslim worship. The Meccan leadership came halfway out to meet them, and a postponement of the pilgrimage until the next year was negotiated "to ready the city for the large crowd." In 630, Muhammad and his supporters returned to Mecca unchallenged, and the city rapidly became Muslim. Muhammad lived only two more years, but during those years the community expanded to include the whole of the Arabian peninsula and part of southern Syria as well. After Muhammad's death in 632, the expansion of Islam continued even more rapidly.

Islamic Cosmology

Like Christianity, the cosmology of Islam bears much resemblance to those of the earlier Sumerian and Judaic traditions. As preached by Muhammad, it conceived of a universe unfolding, with a beginning, God's creation, and an end, a cataclysmic war between Good and Evil and a day of judgment. Like them, it also has a sacred book. This similarity is openly recognized: Islam is

called by Muslims "the religion of Abraham." This is because it is believed that the same laws of God were previously revealed by prophets to both Jews and Christians and that Muhammad was the last of a long line of prophets. Jews and Christians, along with Zoroastrians, are considered by Muslims to be "People of the Book" and are held in higher regard than those of other beliefs. As in Judaism, all the prophets, including Muhammad, were human and mortal. The divinity of Jesus is not recognized in Islamic theology, though the ideas of his conception by the Virgin Mary and his resurrection are.

Muslim Sacred Text

The Qur'an is the sacred book of the Muslims. This book, a collection made in 651 of Muhammad's revelations written down by followers as he uttered them, contains all the principles and precepts necessary to live life according to God's plan. Considered to be God's word and eternal, the Qur'an was revealed and copied down in Arabic. The effect has been to make Arabic the official, if not sacred, language of Islam, learned to some degree by all Muslims.

Islamic Law

In addition to the Qur'an and its language, Islamic law and daily ritual held the Islamic community together in faith as it rapidly expanded to include many diverse cultures. *Shari'a*, or Islamic law, took its final shape in the ninth century. Like the Jewish Talmud, it is comprehensive, dealing with dietary laws and prayer ritual as well as with building codes and punishment for murder. The *shari'a* is based on the Qur'an, which functions in effect as the constitution of God. For cases not clearly addressed by the Qur'an, local customs, *hadith* (stories about the sayings and actions of Muhammad), general consensus, and analogy were used to modify and extend the *shari'a*, which became the law of the land wherever Muslim governments held sway.

Muslim Prayer and Pilgrimage

While the *shari'a* defined legal relations in the Islamic world, the "Five Pillars of Islam" guided everyday individual practice of Islam. To be a Muslim, one must follow the five primary rules spelled out in the Qur'an. The first is that Muslims must bear witness or testify that they believe in the one and only God and that Muhammad was his last prophet. The second is that they must pray daily. Five times per day is specified in the Qur'an, and they must pray especially on Friday, when the whole community gathers to hear a sermon. Third, Muslims must voluntarily give a tenth of their annual income to provide for the poor of the community. Fourth, during one month of the year, Ramadan, all Muslims must fast during daylight hours. Finally, at least once

in their lives, they should go to Mecca on pilgrimage. Today, about 2 million pilgrims from all over the world visit Mecca each year.

The Expansion and Division of Islam

These factors—the Qur'an and its Arabic language, the Five Pillars of Islam, and the *shari'a*—together provided a cosmology that would be the basis for a multicultural community reaching from West Africa to China. From the beginning of Islamic expansion, efforts were made to hold this multicultural community together under a single imperial government. These attempts proved unsuccessful, even though Islam remained the official state ideology of component parts of the Muslim world just as Judaism had been in the Jewish Palestinian state and Christianity was in the Roman Empire after 380. As with Judaism and Christianity, there was pressure from rulers to create and maintain an orthodoxy, an "official" Islamic credo and ritual.

Political and Religious Authority in Islam

Because Islam, like later Judaism, has no ordained priesthood, religious authority was invoked by scholars and judges. Informal councils, and conferences of scholars and judges produced over time the standard positions on free will, revelation, and the role of reason in law and theology. The close association of political and religious authority made opposition to established government an issue that had to be justified on theological grounds. Similarly, theological differences became political issues. Both theological and political differences caused long-standing and profound divisions in Islam.

Theological and Political Divisions in Islam

One such division is the split between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. This originated as a political dispute over government succession following the death of Muhammad. Some felt that a member of his family should succeed him, while others thought it should be someone elected by and from the general council of community leaders. The latter was the *sunni*, or "traditional" way, and it won out. The other was the way of the *shi'i*s, or "partisans" of the Prophet's family and their descendants. Initially, there was little theology involved in this. After 200 years of underground resistance, however, the majority *shi'i* position evolved into a messianic doctrine by the ninth century, a time of political turmoil in the Islamic Empire. According to this doctrine, the seventh (some say the twelfth) descendant of Muhammad through his son-in-law Ali did not die but rather was lifted up by God as the Mahdi, or Messiah, and waits in heaven for judgment day. While waiting, he guides the *shi'i* leaders on earth below, making those leaders in turn very powerful figures in the *shi'i* community. Other political disagreements produced theological differences, but only the *sunni*/*shi'i* split resulted in significant divisions.

Early Islamic Empires and the Spread of Islam

The Islamic state that expanded out of Arabia in the mid-seventh century looked at first to be nothing more than a series of raids by the rural farming and nomadic Arabs of the peninsula. It was anything but that. Rapidly seizing Palestine, Syria, and Iraq by 640, the armies moved steadily west through Egypt and across north Africa into Spain, east through Iran, and south into India. By 730 an Arab Islamic empire stretched across west Asia into continents beyond, well established and functioning much as other empires did to provide order to the world. The functions were the same; the ideology behind them was, however, different.

The Nature of Islamic Government

The Islamic government established by Muhammad in Mecca in 630 began as an expression of the revealed word of God. Islamic ideology called on all people, including government leaders, to return to God's path for humanity. This path spelled out how individuals were to relate to God and to others in society. Its political dimension focused on the ordering of the community according to God's plan. The Muslim community rested on the assumed universality of membership in Islam. Membership was determined not by birth but rather by an individual's professed faith in God and ethical behavior according to God's laws. Accordingly, the expansion of the Muslim community was potentially limitless. The role of Islamic government was to maintain God's law and order as described in God's book, the Qur'an, which functioned as a constitution for Muslim society. Islamic rulers, and their laws and decrees, were as subject to the Qur'an as were ordinary citizens.

The role of the Muslim ruler and the principles of succession to rule were established in the first decades of the Islamic state's history. As long as Muhammad was alive (up to 632), his power as ruler was unchallenged, though he claimed no divinity. Upon Muhammad's death, however, the choice of his successor, or caliph, triggered controversy. Despite the problems of succession, the early Islamic state was well served by experienced leaders supported by the sophisticated merchant aristocracy of Mecca, who were well aware of the political and economic systems of West Asia. With the rapid conversion and recruitment of large numbers of nomadic lineage groups throughout Arabia into its army, Islam expanded by conquering Roman Syria, Egypt, and parts of the Persian Empire.

The Umayyad Caliphate

In 656, the caliphate was assumed by Muawiyyah, son of the aristocratic Bani Umayah family of Mecca. Muawiyyah moved the Islamic Empire's capital to Damascus, where it remained until 750, when the dynasty he founded, the Umayyads, was overthrown. In Damascus, which was the old Roman capital

of the province of Syria, the institutional foundations of Islamic imperial administration were established as further expansion of the state took place.

The Umayyad Expansion

The success of this expansion was astonishing. By 650, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt had fallen to Muslim armies, and much of Persia as well. North Africa was brought under Islamic governmental control in the following decades. Spain was invaded in 711; by 730, nearly all of it was governed by Muslim administration and would remain so for another 700 years. By the end of the eighth century, the city of Córdoba on the Iberian peninsula was the leading city west of Constantinople. Though dwarfed by contemporary Asian cities such as the Chinese capital of Chang'an, Córdoba housed a population of perhaps half a million Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Muslim Invasions of India

The same course of rapid conquest was followed in the east. By 715, Muslim armies had crossed the Indus River and moved north to occupy much of its huge river basin in northwestern India. The Muslim invaders of India encountered fragmented political authority in the form of regional kingdoms that had unsuccessfully attempted to unite north India. In the mid-seventh century, the ruler of one of these kingdoms had established control over the Ganges plain, but this political unity had not survived his death. The Muslim invaders also encountered Hinduism and Buddhism among the populations they conquered in north India, as well as the strict social hierarchy shaped by the caste system. Previous invaders had been absorbed by the ancient civilization of the subcontinent, but the Muslims were bearers of a proselytizing religious faith with a powerful social and political ideology that sharply challenged the cultural and social, as well as political, orders of India. After the Muslim invasions that began in the eighth century, India became a land where Muslim mosques (places of worship) and Hindu temples stood side by side.

Summary

This chapter has developed the theme of the relationship between ideas and power by examining the interaction between the universal religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam and states in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam alike were proselytized by their followers, adapted to different cultural settings, and used to provide religious sanctions for rulers. Unlike Buddhism, however, both Christianity and Islam used military power to conquer and convert peoples and created their own governments.

From its origins in sixth-century B.C.E. India, Buddhism was transmitted through central to east Asia by the beginning of the first millennium C.E. to become one of the great proselytizing, universal religions of world history. Emerging from the Sumerian and Judaic traditions of early West Asia, both Christianity and Islam were, by the close of the first millennium C.E., institutionalized universal religions with large populations of adherents in lands that stretched from northern Europe to North Africa and from the Mediterranean to East Africa and the Himalayas. As all three of these religions were introduced into different cultures and societies, they underwent significant adaptations to indigenous belief systems at the same time that they dramatically altered the religious ideals and values of peoples around the globe.

All three early universal religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—were further expanded by those who held the reins of power in the areas where they took root. Although Buddhism interacted with political authority in various cultural settings, lending its sanction to some rulers, it did not become the engine of empire that Christianity, and especially Islam, did. Just as political forces shaped the growth and spread of these religions, so Christianity and Islam both played powerful roles in legitimizing political authority.