This is the version of the article accepted for publication in *The Silk Road, Fourth Conference on Chinese Studies,* 4. pp. 291-300 (2018). published by Confucius Institute, Sofia
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Religious Syncretism and Cultural Pluralism along the Central and East Asian Silk Road – New Discoveries and Venues for Research

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The end of the Cold War and the challenges of progressing globalization in the ensuing decades have generated a diversity of popular and elite secular and religious attitudes to the related phenomena of cultural diversity and pluralism ((frequently couched as multiculturalism), intercultural dialogue, multiculturalism and transnationalism, often triggered by political developments and projects. Within the European Union, for example, such top-down projects included the active promotion of the *The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue* in 2008 and a number of associated policy-building activities and initiatives[1]. *The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue* project reflected and advanced the objectives and priorities of the European Commission document, *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World* (European Commission, 2007) and the definitions of intercultural dialogue supplied by the report of the European Commission-contracted expert team, ERICarts, *Sharing Diversity: National Approaches to Intercultural Dialogue in Europe* ((ERICarts, 2008). However, only two years after the celebration of *The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue* in a series of official statements in 2010 and 2011 the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, the then President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, and the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, declared the failure of multiculturalism in their respective states, statements clearly indicative of the growing crisis of state multiculturalism in Europe which was becoming increasingly visible on a variety of political and cultural levels.

These current and continuing shifts in "official" and popular stances to multiculturalism in Europe have developed against the background of various recent far-reaching developments on the international scene such as the growing politicization and radicalization of certain currents in world religions, accompanied by the deprivatization of religion and its assertive reinstatement in the political and public space. The various outcomes of this process include outbreaks of religiously-motivated, clerically-justified and state-sponsored, group and individual political violence, provoked on occasion by inter-religious

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strife in and around historic and paradigmatic religious sites. Some of these religious sites have provided in the past the location and framework of premodern religious interchange and co-existence which have been recently and currently terminated by new religious authorities and agents acting to "purge" the respective religious site (which they declare to legitimately own and oversee) from "alien" religious presence and cultic observances.

These evolving and multiplying conflicts over historic religious sites have caught not only national governments and international bodies by surprise and unprepared but also political, diplomatic and military decision-makers, security analysts and political science think-tanks, given the prevalent (until very recently) politicological postulates of an irreversibly advancing global secularization. These postulates anticipated the universalization of the values and institutions of secular humanism and Western modernity which were supposed to bring about the progressive world-wide decline of religious influence in the socio-political and socio-cultural spheres. Instead the encounters and interaction between the globalizing and secularizing outcomes of Western-driven modernity and the religio-political forces of counter- and de-secularization have been re-ignited and developed in a variety of new and currently unpredictable directions since the late 1980s. The future courses of this complex interaction came under increasing scrutiny and debate concentrated on the controversial current role of religion in world politics and inter-civilizational confrontation and/or dialogue, as articulated and popularized, for instance, in Samuel Huntington's and Francis Fukuyama's respective theses of the 'Clash of Civilizations' (Huntington, 1996) and 'The End of History'(Fukuyama, 1992).

The crisis of the theory of universal secularisation and the distinct resurgence of politicised and prophetic religion have brought into sharper focus the increasingly topical problems of regional and global inter-cultural and inter-religious conflicts as well as bridge-building and sharing at key historic religious sites. A conflict-focused approach to the balance of power in inter-communal relations around such religious sites, its dormant, occurring and contingent tensions and shifts, with their potential for expulsive violence, is discernible in the much discussed thesis of "antagonistic tolerance" (underlying the sharing of religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans) advanced in the anthropological studies of Robert Hayden (Hayden, 2002) and Ron Hassner's subsequent arguments for the essential "undivisibility" and "unshareability" of sacred places (Hassner 2002). Other evolving anthropological approaches to the patterns of intercommunality at mixed holy places have shown that conflict-prioritizing models are not sufficient to analyze and explain the multi-layered socio-religious fields of interaction at such shared sites (Albera and Couroucli, 2012; Bowman, 2012).

While the repercussions of the influential theories of Huntington and Fukuyama were especially evident in the field of political science, with the publication of Jonathan Sacks' *The Dignity of Difference* (Sacks, 2002), the debate on the 'clash' or 'dialogue' of civilizations was brought into the sphere of theology. Drawing on and illuminating the relevance of Jewish religious, social and political history in wider socio-confessional frameworks. Sacks appealed for updated and more nuanced paradigms in the manner in which the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions regard and approach each other as well as the non-Abrahamic religious world. According to Sacks such subtler paradigms and approaches are needed, so that religious authorities and lay people, can genuinely acknowledge the religious and spiritual integrity of those who do not profess their respective faith (Sacks, 2002: 4-5) and thus conceptualize a shared and cognitive space for the religious differences, recognizing them as sources of values and human creativity (Sacks, 2002: 13-15, 53-55).

The dynamics of such emerging and contrasting stances on multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the public socio-cultural and socio-religious spheres of globalizing modernity inevitably has attracted increasing attention and diverse, often contradictory, treatment in legal, theological, anthropological and sociological analyses and debates. Critiques of and reactions against the European Union's declarations and policies on multiculturalism also indicate that cultural and religious pluralism cannot be approached and understood solely in the framework of modern European developments and the Eurocentric lens need to be widened and transcended to consider also comparable pre-modern and non-European phenomena, involving international networks promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and co-existence. The historic trans-continental routes linking the Mediterranean and East Asia, commonly labelled the Silk Road, and the dynamics of the wide-ranging religious and cultural exchange and syncretism during the active phases of its millennia-old history, certainly represents the most symptomatic of these pre-modern globalization phenomena.

A series of archaeological excavations and work on manuscript collections in the last thirty years or so have opened new venues for research on the multi-faceted processes of religious syncretism and cultural pluralism, especially along the pre-modern Central and East Asian Sections of the Silk Road. The identification of various layers (Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Nestorian Christian, Manichaean, Taoist, etc.) in the written and archaeological record of this syncretism and pluralism raised some major questions regarding the specific processes and

strategies of achieving and maintaining this diversity for lengthy historical periods in a succession of Asian cultures. Such processes and strategies are particularly relevant when they occur on the basis of non-conflictual models and the translatability of cultural and religious concepts and vocabulary which can be contrasted with the more conflict-oriented or supersessionist religio-cultural models prevalent in pre-modern Europe and the Near and Middle East since late antiquity.

The shifting balance between oasis and steppe economies, nomadic and sedentary societies and changing patterns of oasis and nomadic states, tribal confederations and imperial state formations along the Central Asian sections of the Silk Road led to long-term processes of meeting, cross-pollination and "catalysis" of rather diverse cultural and religious traditions. The archaeological and written evidence suggests that the formation of cultures of religious and cultural pluralism, leading to a variety of syncretisms in the region, reached its mature stages during late antiquity when it fell largely under the suzerainty of the early Sasanian Persian empire, occasionally challenged and limited by the incursions and conquests of Inner Asian nomadic powers. The study of the distinctive cultures of the late antique Central Asian sections of the Silk Road, especially Sogdiana, has made a steady progress in the last fifty years or so and has furnished much data illustrating the conspicuous diversity and dazzling confluence of artistic and cultic traditions at its city temples, royal complexes and private residences. Apart from the local version(s) of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian traditions and Zoroastrianism maintained in its city states, the long-distance trade along the Sogdiana sector of the Silk Road also facilitated the diffusion of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity across its caravan routes farther into Central and East Asia and China. The Sogdian role in the combining and undertaking of trade and religious missions along the Silk Road is clearly demonstrated by the growing number of Sogdian Buddhist, Manichaean and Christian manuscripts and fragments unearthed in previous or current phases of research along its Central and East Asian sections.

The characteristic patterns of cultural eclecticism and religious syncretism and/or symbiosis in late antique Sogdiana is manifest in the depiction of religious and mythological narratives in the mural paintings and cult sculpture at its city temples, royal and residential structures at Samarkand, Bukhara, Panjikent, etc. which can make use of and combine Scytho-Siberian, Hellenistic, Iranian and Indian iconographies and stylistic features (Беленицкий, 1973; Azarpay, 1981; Belenizki, 1980; Marshak, 2002; Маршак 2008). What is symptomatic of the trajectories of cultural interchange between the Central and East Asian

sections of the Silk Road is the evidence of some Sogdian artistic schools eventually bearing the impact of a contact with Chinese art (Marshak, 2001; Маршак 2008: 17-19). While certain Zoroastrian beliefs are discernible in the murals of Sogdian temples, royal and residential buildings - especially in Sogdian funerary art (Grenet:1986; Škoda,1987; Маршак 2008: 11-12, 14) the surviving evidence of Sogdian religious art and cultic architecture reveals the extent of Sogdian religious tolerance and allowances for cultic pluralism in Sogdian cities. The co-existence of varied cultic observances within the same public temple space or private worship areas is archaeologically evidenced, for instance, by the sanctuary of Shiva and Parvati at the Panjikent city temple (Маршак 2008: 10-11), the traces of a Buddha veneration in a Penjikent private house (Маршак 2008: 12), and the royal and aristocratic patronage of the cult of the non-Zoroastrian goddess, Nana (Grenet and Marshak (1998).

Continuing discoveries of and research on ancient Sogdian manuscripts such as the famed 'Sogdian Ancient Letters' (Reichelt, 1928, 1931) and the archival collections of Panjikent's ruler of the Mount Mugh fortres in the upper Zarafshan valley, comprising documents in Sogdian, Chinese, Arabic and Turkic runic script (Фрейман, Лившиц, Боголюбов, Смирнова, 1962-1963) keep shedding new light on the political, trading and cultural role of the Sogdian cities/city states on the Silk Road and their diverse and close links with China. Recent and ongoing archaeological endeavours such as the projects of the Franco-Uzbek Archaeological Mission and the Hermitage Archaeological Expedition at Panjikent, highlighted the potential of such work to produce fresh discoveries and revolutionize the study of the Central and East Asian sections of the Silk Road.

The impressive eastward expansion of Manichaeism into Central Asia and China is also indicative of the environment of religious pluralism along the Central and East Asian sections of the Silk Road, in sharp contrast to the collapse of the westward course of the Manichaean mission amid the intensifying and violent anti-Manichaean persecution in the late antique West and East Roman Empires. The history of the progress of Manichaeism along the Silk Road has been stimulated by the discoveries of numerous Manichaean texts at Dunhuang and Turfan; the ongoing publications of diverse primary sources on the "eastern" Manichaean problematic have shown that after establishing an early foothold in eastern Iran, Bactria and Sogdiana, in the religiously pluralist climate of Central Asia Manichaeism was to encounter, co-exist with and compete for converts both with Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity.

In the sixth century the Central Asian sections of the Silk Road became a stepping stone for the entry and diffusion of Manichaeism and its networks in China. The

establishment of the Manichaean “Church of Light” in China was greatly facilitated by the reopening of trade routes and exchange between China and states and cities on the more western sections of the Silk Road after a lengthy period of disruption to west-east commercial links and movements along its transcontinental routes caused by a series of migrations and invasions of nomadic tribal unions and confederations from the steppes into Central Asia and North China.

Multilingual Sogdian traders, officials and diplomats (who with other Sogdians converted to Manichaeism and Buddhism) played a major role in the diffusion and establishment of Manichaeism and Buddhism first in Central Asia and then via the Sogdian trading, cultural and religious networks in Eastern Asia, as well as in T’ang dynasty China (618–907) - (Lieu, 1979:15-16; Lieu, 1992: 219-230; Lieu 2000: 52-54) Significantly, the advance of Manichaeism, Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity in China occurred and continued at a time when the eastward Asian progress of Muslim Arab conquests and state-building were about to bring an end to the historic religious pluralism and diversity in the traditional regions along the Central Asian sections of the Silk Road.

During the late seventh and early eighth centuries Manichaean missionaries were granted audiences at the Chinese imperial court (analysis of the circumstances in Lieu 1992: 230-231) and characteristically an imperial edict of 732 stated that Manichaeism misleadingly posed as a school of Buddhism and hence deserved prohibition, but at the same time allowed its practice if only among foreigners in T’ang China (translated in Chavannes and Pelliot 1913: 154[178]). In 762–763 concurrent with the intervention of the Uighur Turks in China to help the beleaguered T’ang government against the successful and expanding rebellion of the half-Sogdian military commander, An Lu-shan , Manichaean priests succeeded in converting the Uighur Khagan. Manichaeism became the official religion of the new Central Asian steppe empire of the Uighurs and now backed by Uighur political and military machine could enhance its presence and expand its mission further in Central Asia and China. Due to the Uighur role in suppressing the An lu-shan rebellion and restoring T’ang rule, Uighur influence in Chinese internal political affairs increased and consequently, the T’ang government to allow the establishment of Manichaean temples in the two capital cities, in four provinces in the Yangtze basin, as well as in one of its northern strategic towns. By that time Buddhism also had greatly increased its influence in China, gaining T’ang royal patronage and co-existing as a foreign religion with Zoroastrianism (brought by Iranian exiles from the Muslim Arab-conquered Sasanian empire), and some Nestorian Christian communities.

During this period of Uighur influence in China Manichaeism profited from its status as a privileged foreign religion in China. However, this period of stabilization and even spread of Manichaeism in China came abruptly to an end when the Uighur empire collapsed in 840. First, Manichaeism, then Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism suffered variously reversals of fortune in campaigns which halted a period of the remarkable influence and spread of foreign religions in a remarkably pluralistic climate in pre-840s T'ang China.

In the second Uighur empire, established in the Tarim Basin (in the modern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in north-west China), Manichaeism continued to enjoy the patronage of the Uighur court and along with the Manichaean temples, Manichaean monasteries became influential centres of learning and missionary activities. Manichaeism co-existed and interacted with Buddhism which was to become dominant in the second Uighur realm and Nestorian Christianity which also stabilized and expanded its influence until the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century and the subsequent Islamisation of the Tarim Basin and Xinjiang

In China itself Manichaean communities and cells succeeded in establishing themselves in Fukien and even began to penetrate neighbouring areas. If originally Manichaeism in China was a religion predominantly professed by foreign Sogdian merchants or envoys and Uighur mercenaries, in Fukien it gradually underwent Sinicization. While relations between Manichaeism and Buddhism in China have often been marked by intense rivalries and Buddhist polemicists frequently attacked Manichaean tenets, Taoists could adopt a much less controversialist and more eclectic approach to Manichaeism. Confucian attitudes to the 'Religion of Light' were usually based on judgements regarding its presumed or perceived association with secret religious sects in China. Given its traditional missionary tactics, in its expansion along the Central and Eastern Asian sections of the Silk Road Manichaeism inevitably not only came to use Buddhist and Taoist terminology and notions as an important element of its proselytism (Lieu 1992, chs. 7-9 *passim*; Bryder 1985, Schmidt-Glintzer 1987, Kilmkeit 1977, Lieu 1998: 59-76) but also came under the impact of Buddhist and Taoist teachings. In Central Asia Mani could be identified with Maitreya, the would-be Buddha (Lieu 1992: 300-301), and could be given the title 'Mani, the Buddha of Light' (Lieu 1992: 255-257). Eastern Manichaeans compiled a life of Mani based on that of Buddha (texts in Schmidt-Glintzer 1987: 69-77; Tajadod 1990) and in certain Taoist circles Mani came to be regarded as one of the avatars of Lao-Tzu himself, the founder of Taoism (Lieu, 1992: 259-610). Such identifications could allow Manichaean networks in South

China to pass off as their Buddhist or Taoist counterparts and in the eleventh century Fukien, Manichaeans were successful in persuading Chinese commissioners to include a Chinese Manichaean work in the Taoist canon (on the historical contexts of this inclusion: Lieu 1992: 268-70).

The characteristic label, 'Vegetarians and Demon Worshippers', by which Manichaeans were derided by their adversaries, was also used against some Buddhist and Taoist secret sects. Due to the various ascetic and magical practices cultivated in such esoteric Taoist and Buddhist sects, Manichaeism could be attacked along similar lines which makes its history from the Sung to the early Ming periods (eleventh–fourteenth centuries), amid the political rebellions and clandestine activities of various secret societies rather obscure and frequently impossible to reconstruct (surveys and critical discussion of the primary sources in Lieu 1979: 27-35; Lieu 1992: chs. 8-9).

Anti-Manichaean measures in China were largely motivated by the perception of Manichaeism, particularly by Confucian officials, as a secret religious society, which, on a par with other sects, had secret network of cells, which could potentially be employed to subvert law and order. But apart from this perceived association between sectarianism and social disturbance or rebellion, Confucian attitudes were not underlain by a concern with the Manichaean religious and intellectual challenge to the established religion and religio-political order as in the case of the Christian anti-Manichaean polemicists, as well as secular and clerical elites who earlier had enacted the extermination of Manichaeism in the Christianized West and East Roman empires.

Chinese Manichaeism outlasted by centuries all other Manichaean offshoots in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East and indeed may have joined with other secret religions in Fukien and persisted in syncretistic forms into modern times (Wuschu 1992). Like Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity, Manichaean diffusion in Central Asia and China was a direct outcome of the long-range traffic of people, cultural and religious traditions along the Central and East Asian sectors of the Silk Road and its environment of eclecticism, pluralism and syncretism. Once it was forced underground, its impact on Chinese culture and religion becomes far more subtle and identifying its presence, traces and after-life in such Chinese contexts still remains a formidable task.

The antique and late antique syncretistic and pluralist cultures which existed along the Central Asian sectors of the Silk Road and the transmutations of Manichaeism in contact with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism in China (until its assimilation into Chinese popular religions) is of considerable importance for understanding the nature and trajectories of inter-

religious and inter-cultural relations and globalizing exchange in pre-modern and non-European settings. The growing evidence of Taocisation of Christian and Manichaean concepts and beliefs in pre-modern Chinese contexts indicate a dynamic of religio-cultural trasplantability and translatability which are clearly of major relevance to the current global dilemmas and crises of multiculturalism and religious diversity in an increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world.

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