

Religion Past & Present

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1914), Ashur is one of the best-explored cities of the ancient Near East. Among the objects uncovered there were: enormous fortresses, the acropolis with the → Ashur temple and the associated ziggurat as well as the temple of the imperial gods (the double temples of the moon and sun gods, of the weather and sky gods; the Ishtar temple), royal palaces, residential districts, and the New Year's festival house outside the city. Important finds from the temple and priestly libraries as well as private archives provide information about the Assyrians' religious, intellectual, and everyday lives.

W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur*, 21977.

Stefan M. Maul

Asia

I. Geopolitical Considerations, Concept – II. History of Religions – III. Modern Asian Religions outside Asia – IV. Christianity

I. Geopolitical Considerations, Concept

Culturally, economically, and politically, Asia is extraordinarily heterogeneous. The Islamic states of the Near East with their oil wealth are part of this continent, as are the multireligious societies of South and Southeast Asia, relatively poor in resources, and the countries of East Asia with their extraordinarily dynamic economies (at least through the mid 70s).

Equally diverse are the geopolitical forces at work on this continent. Examples include: the competition of Near Eastern states for scarce water; the struggle between → Iran and → Iraq for regional dominance; competing territorial claims of individual states, such as the conflict between → India and → Pakistan over Kashmir; and the striving of economically successful states (esp. → Japan and South → Korea) to expand their spheres of influence.

In comparison with other continents, the importance of Asia is due primarily to demographic and economic factors. The majority of the world's population (61% in 2003) lives between the Bosphorus and the Pacific. After the USA, → China has the largest gross national product in the world (in terms of real purchasing power). Until the middle of the 1980s, nowhere else have markets expanded so rapidly.

Domestically, economic progress has reduced mass poverty in many countries. Examples include → Taiwan, South Korea, → Hong Kong, → Singapore, → Thailand, → Indonesia, and China. But most of the absolutely poor people of the world still live in South Asia. Their disposable income hardly suffices to provide for their basic needs, even by local standards (→ Poverty, → Poor, Care of the: VII).

Political as well as cultural factors in individual states have led to varying degrees of success in devel-

opment. The two factors can hardly be separated. The Islamic revolution in Iran, for example, brought about an economic recession. In India, a cumbersome bureaucracy has blocked private industry for decades, and many hindrances to economic development rooted in traditional Hinduism have aggravated the effects. In East Asia, by contrast, pragmatic economic policies coupled with a loyalty toward the government fostered by → Confucianism have contributed significantly to an economic boom. In the mid 90s, the severe economic crisis in East Asia cast a shadow over the future of the continent. It turned out that the evolution of legal and political institutions could not keep pace with the astonishing economic growth of the 70s and 80s. Whether or not the necessary institutional reforms will succeed will determine whether East Asia – as many expect – will actually be the economic center of gravity of the 21st century.

Asian Development Bank, *Asia: Development Experience and Agenda*, ADB Theme Paper 3, 1995 • J.E. Campos & H.L. Root, *The Key to the Asian Miracle: Making Shared Growth Credible*, 1996 • D. Rumley et al., eds., *Global Geopolitical Change and the Asia-Pacific: A Regional Perspective*, 1996. Hermann Sautter

II. History of Religions

Asia is not only the largest and most populous continent, but also the most religiously diverse. All religions that achieved universal significance originated in Asia: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in West Asia, → Buddhism and → Hinduism in India, Confucianism in China. In addition to these great traditions, all of which have influenced Asian cultures beyond the regions where they originated, to the present day there still exist religious traditions restricted to certain regions or ethnic groups. We may mention, particularly, the shamanic traditions (→ Shamanism) of Central and Northern Asia. But even in the heartlands of the universal religions the religious life of the people is often strongly influenced by regional traditions originating outside the great traditions ("popular religion").

The extreme diversity of Asia's religious traditions can be described chronologically and geographically. Advanced urban civilizations arose from Neolithic agricultural civilizations in three regions: → Mesopotamia (c. 3000 BCE), the Indus Valley (c. 2300 BCE), and Northern China (c. 1600 BCE). Their rise already defines the three cultural centers that the history of religions identifies to this day: West Asia, where most of the societies bear the impress of Islam; South Asia, where Hinduism and Theravāda Buddhism (Hinayāna) are the dominant forms of religion; and East Asia, where Confucianism and Mahāyāna Buddhism shape the culture. At times there have been intensive contacts between these three cultural centers, especially via the great trade

routes in Central Asia (→ Silk Road and the sea routes between Arabia and East Asia).

In West Asia, besides Mesopotamia, other complex civilizations with a state organization arose in → Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine (→ Ugarit, → Israel). A feature common to the religions of most of these peoples is a king with a high religious status and a priesthood engaged in the temple cult. The monotheistic cult of Yahweh in Israel occupies a special and significant place in the history of religions; from its roots evolved Judaism and Christianity. Here, a fundamental shift of emphasis came about when ritual and temple cult was subordinated to ethical obligations of the people *vis-à-vis* the deity. A similar ethicization of the idea of God took place in Iran, where → Zarathustra established the worship of Ahura Mazda.

In India, there was no unbroken continuity between the religions of the archaic urban cultures of the Indus Valley and the religion of the migrating Indo-Europeans, who invaded India in several waves beginning in the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE. Early evidence concerning the religion of the Indo-European population is recorded in the → Vedas. A characteristic feature of this religion is the central importance of the sacrificial cult performed by the → Brahmins. Around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, religious innovations came about that reduced the importance of the sacrificial ritual, emphasizing instead the individual search for salvation. Buddhism and → Jainism developed into separate and independent religious traditions, while the teachings of the Upanishads exerted a lasting influence on the development of Hinduism.

In China, too, profound religious and intellectual changes began in the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, leaving only scattered relics of the archaic religion. → Confucius preached an ethically based social philosophy, while the natural philosophy associated with the name → Lao-Tsu is characterized by a marked individualism (→ Taoism). The spread of Buddhism in China after the 1st century BCE brought further religious innovations, which prefigured the search for individual salvation.

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity in particular spread far beyond the regions from which they originated. From India, Buddhism spread to China via Central Asia and south to Sri Lanka, and finally to Southeast Asia. From China, Buddhism was brought to Korea and, around the middle of the first millennium CE, to Japan. At the same time, Confucianism traveled to Korea and Japan, so that all of East Asia now stands under the double influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism (via China) and Confucianism. Christianity spread not only in the European and North African portions of the Roman Empire, but also in its Asian territories. With the coming of Islam in the 7th century, how-

ever, the influence of Christianity became increasingly weaker. West Asia, Central Asia, and finally even parts of India came under Islamic rule and, consequently, were extensively islamized. Seafaring Arab traders brought Islam as far as South China and promoted the spread of Islam in parts of Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia). → Manichaeism deserves special mention: from Iran, it spread not only west but also east as far as China, where it is attested as late as the early 16th century.

Despite the temporary ascendancy of individual religions, there was always a high degree of religious diversity in all the regions of Asia. In West Asia, though Islam was dominant, Christianity and Judaism continued to exist; in East Asia, Taoism (China) and Shintoism (Japan) developed alongside Buddhism and Confucianism. Religious pluralism is especially conspicuous in India, where Buddhism and Jainism existed alongside numerous religions that can be called Hinduistic (esp. → Vaiṣṇavism and → Śaivism). The advance of Islam to India paralleled the decline of Buddhism, which largely vanished in India after the 12th century.

The advance of the European powers into Asia in the modern period, especially from the 19th century on, resulted in the appearance of Christian missionaries in almost every region. Contact with Western civilization, which was militarily and economically superior, as well as with Christianity, helped contribute to a cultural crisis in many Asian lands during the 19th and 20th centuries. This crisis affected the traditional religions as well. At the end of the 20th century, however, postcolonial cultural renewal often led to an increased appreciation of religious traditions, sometimes with political support. This is especially true of Islam, but also of Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

T. Ling, *A History of Religion East and West*, 1968 • E.L. Farmer, G.R.G. Hambly, D. Kopf, et al., eds., *Comparative History of Civilizations in Asia*, 2 vols., 1977. Hubert Seiwert

III. Modern Asian Religions outside Asia

In modern times, some Asian religions spread beyond their countries of origin, primarily through the migration of ethnic groups to new territories; they have remained more or less limited to these groups (e.g. → Sikhism, → Yazidis). Others spread into new lands from the outset without ties to any ethnic community (e.g. Theravāda Buddhism and the Rāmākrishna mission in the West) or through the dissolution of the original bond between ethnicity and religion (e.g. → Shin Buddhism in the USA). The development of new religions is due in part to Asian influences (e.g. → Theosophy, founded in the USA in 1875, but also the → Unification Church, which has been conducting missionary work in the USA since 1958).