

A Silk Road Legacy: Freedom of Trade & Freedom of Religion

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**Opportunity Knocks: Rediscovery of a Lost History and Implications for the
Revival of the Silk Road**

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Abstract

As Kazakhstan seeks to become one of the top thirty economies in the world, in accordance with the 2050 Plan, this thesis discusses the historical role of Nestorian Christianity in Central Asian culture as well as how policies of religious freedom and tolerance facilitated the political stability required for the success of the Great Silk Road commerce.

In view of recent archeological discoveries which verify the historical record of Nestorian Christianity in Kazakhstan territory, along with the creation of the Department for Nestorian Studies, this thesis will also develop this significance of these finds and what it means for the economic and cultural potential of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations.

Introduction

In 2014, in the village of Usharal, Kazakhstan – the site of the ancient Silk Road city Ilan Balik – a local resident discovered a 1m by 40 cm stone with some strange markings and a cross. Upon this discovery, a local schoolteacher contacted authorities. Upon analysis, the stone was identified to be officially the first Nestorian gravestone discovered in Kazakhstan territory.

In August of 2016 the Kazakhstan Archeological Society, in cooperation with the Tandy Archeological Institute, excavated Ilan Balik which yielded numerous Nestorian Christian gravestones. Written in ancient Syriac script, this stone records the burial of a Christian priest. The subsequent excavation of June 2017 yielded a remarkable stone which recorded the burial of two Christian priests who were of local Turkic ethnicity. These finds complement numerous other Nestorian Christian artifacts and gravestones which have been found in many locations throughout Central Asia.

Religions and Trade on the Great Silk Road

For centuries, the Silk Road flourished offering the free flow of trade between the East and the West. It brought silk, paper and ceramic wares to the West. The Silk Road brought furs, metal works, and glass wares to the East. Along with the free flow of trade, the Silk Road also fostered the free exchange of ideas.

Ideas have consequences. Any society which seeks to achieve its full potential must analyze its history as well as the ideas and assumptions underlying society. Who are we as human beings? Where did we come from? What is our purpose? What ideas have worked and why? Which ideas have not worked? Where did we come from and where are we going? How did we get here and how do we get to where we need to go?

Archeology and cultural anthropology are disciplines through which we conduct scientific research to attempt to answer these fundamental questions. To discover – or to rediscover – a lost or forgotten history allows us the opportunity to have a more clear and precise picture of the map of history – where we were, where we are today, and where we should go from here.

The International Conference for Religions of Kazakhstan and Central Asia on the Great Silk Road represents a much needed and bold step in addressing the often overlooked role which religion historically played in Silk Road commerce. The creation of the Department for Nestorian Studies will help facilitate full inquiry and research into the significant role Nestorian Christianity played in the territories of what is to today Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations.

Indeed history records that Nestorian traders played a significant role in spreading the message of Christianity along the Silk Road. In his book *Religions of the Silk Road*, Richard Foltz writes:

“Both Christian and Manichaeic sources attest to the close relationship between mercantile and missionary activity. Syriac, the lingua franca of West Asian trade, became the liturgical language of the Eastern Church. Among the early Christians the Syriac word for merchant, *tgr*, was often used as a metaphor for those who spread the gospel. A fourth century Syriac hymn includes the following stanza:

‘Travel well-girt like merchants,
That we may gain the world.
Convert men to me,
Fill creation with teaching.’”¹

Kazakhstan has made very positive steps in recognizing the important role religion plays in society. In his 2012 speech outlining Kazakhstan’s 2050 Plan to become one of the top thirty economies in the world, President Nursultan Nazarbayev affirmed the role of religion in development, stating: “We enter a period of our development, when the spiritual issues will have a meaning no less important than issues of economic and material concern.”² In affirming Kazakhstan’s commitment to tolerance, he stated: “It is not the States’ role to intervene on the internal affairs of religious communities. We remain steadfastly committed to the freedom of conscience, tolerance of traditions and principles.”³

There were many religions along the Silk Road, which until the 14th century coexisted peacefully. When rulers allowed this freedom of religion, protecting the rights of the people, Silk Road trade flourished. This is an important lesson for today as Kazakhstan seeks to serve as a

¹ Richard C. Foltz. *Religions of the Silk Road*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1999), 62.

² President Nursultan Nazarbayev. “Strategy Kazakhstan 2050: New Political Course of the Established State.” Astana, 2012.

³ Ibid.

leader in reviving Silk Road commerce. Situated as the geopolitical center between East and West, Kazakhstan has an extraordinary opportunity to serve as the prime mover to bring back to life the Great Silk Road.

The Significant Role of Nestorian Christianity in Central Asian History

As discussed by several presenters in the International Conference of the Religions of Kazakhstan and Central Asia on the Great Silk Road, Nestorian Christianity played a significant role in the history of the Silk Road.

In the 13th century, Flemish missionary explorer William Rubruck recorded that there were 200,000 baptized Kerait Christians. In his classic work *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Samuel Hugh Moffett refers to the 13th century account of the conversion of the Kerait in 1007, as recorded by Jacobite historian Gregory Bar Hebraeus. The Kerait king became lost while hunting in the mountains. According to Bar Hebraeus, a saint appeared to the king in a vision, proclaiming: “If you believe in Christ, I will lead you lest you perish.”⁴

Upon his return to safety, the king later met up with and questioned two Nestorian Christian merchants and asked them regarding the Christian faith. In his account, Bar Hebraeus refers to a 1099 letter to the Nestorian patriarch John VI of Baghdad, in which describes the conversion and baptism of the Kerait prince along with two hundred thousand Kerait tribesmen. Moffett describes how the Kerait were considered a Christian tribe by the 13th century. It is interesting to note is that the Kerait became Christian in 1007, roughly the same time that the Russians first became Christians in 987.

In his book *The Church of the East*, Christoph Baumer records, that of the two dozen Turko-Mongol tribes which Genghis Khan united in 1206 to form the Mongolian Empire, at least seven of them were Nestorian Christian comprising 30% - 40% of the entire population of 1 - 1.5 million.⁵ The Kerait Nestorian Christians alone represented approximately 12% of the entire population of the newly formed Mongolian Empire. In addition to the Kerait, other tribes which were significantly Nestorian Christian included the Merkit, Naiman, Ongut, Uighurs, Uriyangakit, Kangli, and Manchurian.

The Kerait were the first Turko-Mongol tribe to befriend and protect an as-yet insignificant chieftain of a small Mongol clan named Yesugei, whose son Temujin – better known as Genghis Khan – would become the leader of the Golden Horde.⁶ In the late 12th century the Kerait Christian chief Toghrul Wang-Khan became patron to Temujin, which gave rise to the popular legend in the West of a “Christian king of Asia, Prester John.”⁷

⁴ Samuel Hugh Moffett. *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I.* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 400.

⁵ Christoph Baumer. *The Church of the East.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 198-199.

⁶ Kevin White. “The History of Islam in Central Asia.” (M.A. thesis, Liberty University, May 5, 2015), 15.

⁷ Moffett, 401.

Sorghaghtani –beki, the daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan and wife of his youngest son Tolui, was a noted Kerait Nestorian Christian, mother of four emperors and credited with significant development of trade and development of the Mongol Empire.

In his book *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins notes that in 8th century, before Christianity was even introduced into German and Dutch territories, the Eastern Church patriarch Timothy already presided over 19 metropolitan sees (regional archbishops) which oversaw eighty five bishops along the Silk Road.

In 780, Timothy reported the conversion of the Turkish king who ruled over much of Central Asia. In 792/93 AD, Timothy wrote in a letter: “The king of the Turks abandoned idol worship and, together with his entire people, became Christian. He asked us to create a metropolitan see, and this we have done.”⁸ Mark Dickens has established this people to be the Qarluqs, and that the metropolitan was likely established at their capital city Talas (modern Taraz).⁹ This is the suspected origin of the five gold-plated silver plates found in southern Siberia.

The city of Merv (modern Mari, Turkmenistan) had a bishop by 420. By 500, Merv as a major Christian center, reaching out to Central Asian Turkish tribes, as well as translating important books from Greek and Syriac into the Central Asian and Eastern Asian languages. Additional metropolitan sees were established in Samarkand and Herat (6th-7th c.), as well as numerous other cities along the Silk Road. Samarkand was the home to the church leader Mar Sargis, who in addition to founding seven monasteries, also served as vice governor to the Chinese Zhenjiang district.¹⁰ Dickens notes that by the 10th century, there were 20 metropolitans and 240 bishops overseeing numerous churches along the Great Silk Road.

Nestorian Christianity spread throughout most of Asia. Perhaps the most impressive testimony of its advance is recorded on the Nestorian Stele, now stored in Xian, China. The monument is dated 781 AD, recorded in Chinese and Syriac script, and commemorates 150 years of Christianity in China. It reads:

When the pure, bright Illustrious Religion
Was introduced to our Tang Dynasty,
The scriptures were translated, and churches built,
And the vessel set in motion for the living and the dead;
Every kind of blessing was then obtained,
And all the kingdoms enjoyed a state of peace.¹¹

⁸ Baumer, 167.

⁹ Mark Dickens. “Patriarch Timothy I and the Metropolitan of the Turks,” 2010, p. 123-127.

¹⁰ Baumer, 174.

¹¹ Dr. Charles Anthony Stewart. “Crosses on the Silk Road.” Presented with Dr. Tom Davis at the International Conference of The Religions of Kazakhstan and Central Asia on the Great Silk Road, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 12, 2017.

The Policy of Religious Freedom and Economic Prosperity

Indeed the heritage of Nestorian Christianity is significant. As long as the Mongols allowed religious freedom, economic development flourished. In 1206, when Ghengis Khan declared himself Kha Khan – Ruler of all Rulers – he implemented a law codex which granted religious freedom and tolerance for all religions in the newly formed Mongolian Empire: “All religions shall be respected; none shall be preferred to the others.”¹² Later on Pentecost Sunday in 1254, the Great Khan Mongke echoed this policy of religious tolerance to William of Rubruck, stating: “We Mongols believe that there is only one God, in whom we live and die, and to him we direct our whole hearts. But, as God gave the hand several fingers, so he gave human beings several ways to achieve blessedness.”¹³

Research has proved a strong correlation between religious freedom and economic development. In their article “Is Religious Freedom Good for Business,” Brian Grim, Greg Clark and Robert Edward Snyder demonstrate that religious freedom is highly correlated with economic development, particularly in emerging economies. They conclude: “Religious hostilities and restrictions create climates that can drive away local and foreign investment, undermine sustainable development, and disrupt huge sectors of economies.”¹⁴

Referring to empirical research from *The Price of Freedom Denied*, authored by Brian Grim and Roger Finke, they conclude:

“More generally, research has shown that religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace and stability, as measured by the absence of violent religious persecution and conflict. This is particularly important for business because where stability exists, there are more opportunities to invest and to conduct normal and predictable business operations, especially in emerging and new markets.”¹⁵

This is an important consideration as Kazakhstan seeks to become one of the top thirty economies in the world, as outlined in the 2050 Plan. Grim’s research has also shown a direct correlation, that where there are more restrictions on religious freedom, there is also greater levels of corruption. Comparing the Pew Research Center’s 2011 Government Restrictions on Religion Index with Transparency International’s 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, it is significant to note that eight of the ten most corrupt countries have high or very high governmental restrictions on religious liberty.¹⁶

At the 2010 Religious Freedom and National Security Policy conference, hosted by Georgetown University, former National Security Council representative Will Imboden

¹² Baumer, 195.

¹³ Baumer, 196.

¹⁴ Brian Grim, Greg Clark and Robert Edward Snyder. “Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, Volume 10, 2014, p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, 4.

¹⁶ Ibid, 4-5.

described how any erosion in a country's religious freedom invariably signals the erosion of all other liberties and human rights. Governments that are not committed to religious liberty become increasingly intolerant and coercive, insisting that they have a monopoly on truth that must be forced on others. Without religious freedom, democracy suffers, economic stagnation becomes inevitable. (White, 2016)

Governments must work to protect the freedoms, rights and property of the people. This in turn will empower the people to be able to use their talents to develop the national economy. The true economic potential of any nation is not its natural resources, but rather its people. As people's freedoms, rights and property are protected, people can flourish in their labors. Responsible freedom of religion, speech and press are the instruments which can help ensure public accountability of all citizens and help create a culture where every citizen feels empowered by having a voice in public affairs. This will in turn encourage personal responsibility, civic duty and ultimately entrepreneurialism.¹⁷

Until the late 13th century in Central Asia, tolerance for all religions and beliefs fostered an atmosphere of freedom, which in turn encouraged free trade. Tragically in the late 13th century, Mahmud Ghazan and especially his son and heir Oljeitu, began to reverse the Mongolian court's policy of tolerance of all religions and severely persecuted Christianity and Buddhism. In 1338, all Christians were killed in the city of Almaliq. By the mid-14th century, most of Central Asian khanates were under Islamic rule.

In the 14th century, Tamerlane would finish the job, eliminating all competing ideas from his own and Islam became the dominant religion in what is today Kazakhstan and Central Asian territory. At this point, not only did Nestorian Christianity and Buddhism disappear, but with it developed cultures, economies, cities and the Silk Road itself.

Again it is important to note that when the khans – that is the government – exercised religious freedom and tolerance, trade along the Silk Road flourished. When this religious freedom and tolerance discontinued, the Silk Road died – and along with it – the economic potential of Central Asia. If we want to revive the Silk Road, we must return to a multicultural tolerance of all religions and allow and protect individual freedoms and rights. These are the natural prerequisites to human flourishing.

Once Again Opportunity Knocks

In *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins describes the need to break the silence of a lost history by rediscovering the lost memories and restoring a lost history. Quoting the title of Charles Olson's poem, he writes: "The chain of memory is resurrection."¹⁸ It is time to rediscover Kazakhstan's lost historical heritage and to recapture its full potential. In doing so, we

¹⁷ Kevin White. "Opportunity is Knocking at Kazakhstan's Door: Three Vital Steps for Kazakhstan to Become the Center and Capitol of a Eurasia Economic Zone." *Exclusive Magazine*, April 18, 2013.

¹⁸ Philip Jenkins. *The Lost History of Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 10

will be witnesses to the revival of the Great Silk Road to the blessing and prosperity to all of the peoples of Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

We today have an extraordinary opportunity to explore and to rediscover not only this lost history and rich cultural heritage, but also to revive the Great Silk Road itself. We must with open arms, open hearts, and open minds investigate the history of Kazakhstan and all of Central Asia. Like the driver of a car must periodically look at the road map to verify his course and heading, we too must be willing to critically analyze history and investigate its claims through archeological excavations and further research.

Indeed opportunity knocks. It is in our hands whether to ignore the opportunity or to answer the door. Our decision will set course for all of post-Soviet Central Asian nations and cultures. Let us embrace the opportunity set before us. Let us go to work – excavate, publish, fill the museums, educate the young and do our part to help Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations to realize their full God-given potential.