

**THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF CENTRAL ASIA
FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY**

James Thrower

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PART I

CENTRAL ASIA PRIOR TO THE ARAB CONQUEST

CHAPTER 1

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Central Asia is a vast expanse of mountains, desert and steppe punctuated by a series of oases.¹ In the north, where the steppe meets the Siberian taiga, or in the south, where a four thousand mile long mountain range, stretching from China to the Black Sea, forms a natural boundary, the physical boundaries of Central Asia are easily defined. To the east, the boundary might be said to be constituted by the Great Wall of China and the Manchurian forest, but to the west, where the northern steppe runs into the grasslands of the Ukraine and on into the plains of Romania and Hungary and where, in the south, the desert runs imperceptibly into the arid steppe of Iran, the boundary is less easy to define.

Central Asia is divided geographically into an eastern and a western zone (later known as Eastern or Chinese Turkestan and Western or Russian Turkestan) by a series of mountain ranges running north east to south west of which the highest are the Pamirs which Marco Polo, travelling in this region in the thirteenth century, called 'the roof of the world'.² These stretch south to a knot where they meet the Himalayas, the Karakorum and the Hindu Kush. East of this knot is the Kun-lun-shan, whilst to the north-east of the Pamirs are the T'ien-shan (the Celestial Mountains) which separate the fertile valleys of the Ili and Jungaria to the north from the arid Tarim basin (Kashgaria) to the south. To the north east of the T'ien-shan is the Altai range of mountains. These are linked with the T'ien-shan by a series of low ranges pierced by long valleys through which the nomadic

¹ See map 1.

² Francis Wood has recently raised the question whether Marco Polo actually did set foot in Central Asia and China. C.f. Francis Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* London: Secker and

peoples of southern Siberia, the Altai, Jungaria, and Mongolia made their way to the steppes of Kazakhstan and from there into Eastern Europe, Iran and the Eastern Mediterranean.

If the mountains have restricted the movements of peoples in this region, the deserts have had an even more restrictive influence.³ The Ust Urt between the Caspian and the Aral seas, the Kara Kum, the Kyzyl Kum, the semi-desert of the Betpak Dala (known as 'The Hungry Steppe') between the Syr Darya and Lake Balkash, the vast Gobi desert which stretches over both Inner and Outer Mongolia, and the infamous Taklamakan, south of the T'ien-shan, which in Uighur means quite literally 'to go in is not to come out' and which the explorer, Sir Aurel Stein, described as 'the most formidable of all the dune-covered wastes of this globe', have all limited the movements of peoples and influenced the course which the development of civilization in this region has taken.

Central Asia can also be divided into a northern and a southern zone by drawing a line along the middle reaches of the Syr Darya river and the T'ien-shan mountain range. Much of the zone to the north of this line, whilst arid in parts, enjoys sufficient moisture to provide the grazing grounds necessary to support pastoral nomadism – the predominant way of life of the people of the steppe until well into the twentieth century. The zone to the south is extremely arid and consists almost entirely of desert, punctuated by oases. However, it was in these oases that the commercial centres of the caravan routes which were to give Central Asia a unique role in the history of the Old World were to be found and along which lines of communication were established between the civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean, of India and of China.

There were two major routes across Central Asia which, beginning (or ending) in the cities of the Mediterranean coast, ran via Palmyra to Bukhara and Samarkand before dividing into a northern route and a southern route.⁴ The

Warburg, 1995. For a critique of Wood's views c.f. T. H. Barrett, *London Review of Books*, 30th November, 1995, p. 28.

³ See map 1.

⁴ See map 2.

northern route ran via Kashgar, Kucha, Turfan and Hami to Tung-huan, whilst the southern route left the main route at Bukhara and ran to Tung-huan via Balkh, Yarkand, Khotan, Endere and Miran. Both routes then ran on via Lanchou and ended (or began) in Ch'ang-an (present day Xi'an). All entered (or left) China through the famous Jade Gate at Yumen. This 'slender dual thread', as the great historian of the steppe, René Grousset, called it⁵, was the road along which travelled peoples, commerce, ideas, and religion. It was to achieve posthumous fame as 'The Silk Road'.⁶ These major east-west routes also had a number of branches, the most famous of which left the southern route at Yarkand and after crossing the hazardous passes over the Karakorum – 'the Gateway to India' – made its way to the markets of the Indian sub-continent.

The danger to these caravan routes, as well as to the fragile civilizations which established themselves in the oases of southern Central Asia, was the Turkco-Mongolian hordes of the north-eastern steppes. In the graphic words of Grousset:

North of this narrow trail of civilization ... the steppes provided the nomads with a different route of a very different order: a boundless number of tracts, the route of barbarism. Nothing halted the thundering barbarian squadrons between the banks of the Orkhon or the Kerulen and Lake Balkhash; for, although toward the latter point the Altai Mountains and the northern spurs of the Tien Shan ranges seem to meet, the gap is wide enough at the Imil river in Tarbagatai, in the direction of Chuguchak, as also between the Yulduz, the Ili, and the Issk Kul basin to the north west, where the horsemen from Mongolia beheld the further boundless expanses of the Kirghiz and Russian steppes. The passes of the Tarbagatai, Ala-Tau, and Muzart were continually crossed by hordes from the eastern steppes on their way to the steppes of the west.⁷

⁵ René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, (trans. Naomi Walford), New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970, p. xxii.

⁶ 'Posthumous' because this evocative name was not used until Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term *Seidenstrassen* in the nineteenth century. It was, however, something of a misnomer in that the 'Silk Road', as we shall see, carried much else besides silk.

⁷ Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, p. xxiii.

However, it is now almost certain that the original flow of peoples across the Eurasian steppe was from west to east, and that speakers of Indo-European languages had, by the beginning of the 4th millennium BCE, penetrated into Central Asia and Siberia as far as Pazyryk and Minusinsk in the north, and Kashgar, Kucha, Kara Shahr, Turfan and Gansu in the south. H. Dani, and V. M. Masson, the editors of the first volume of the UNESCO *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, having surveyed the evidence for the pre-history of Central Asia presented by the contributors to that volume, concluded that the peoples of Central Asia were

regardless of the linguistic attribution of the most ancient groups ... using mainly Indo-European languages towards the end of the second and at the beginning of the first millennium BC.⁸

And the British archaeologist Colin Renfrew wrote:

It was the spread, from west to east, of the *yamno* or Kurgan cultures of the first true steppe neolithic which gave the steppe lands of Europe and Central Asia their first cultural unity. I suggest that the language of these early steppe pastoralists, who were not yet driving chariots or perhaps riding horses, was already Indo-European.⁹

The result of these early movements of peoples across the Eurasian steppe was that by the first millennium BCE we find two groups of nomadic peoples on the steppe – a group of Indo-European speaking peoples found as far east as Gansu in present day China and, in the north and east, the indigenous Turko-Mongolian peoples. Although it is possible that some intermingling of these two races took place, the skeleton remains found by Russian archaeologists show that the predominant group in Central Asia prior to end of the first millennium BCE

⁸ A. H. Dani and V. M. Masson (Eds.) *History of Civilisations of Central Asia*, Paris: UNESCO Publishing, Vol. I., 1992, p. 25.

⁹ Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 202.

was Europoid.¹⁰ However, from the beginning of the 2nd century BCE the ethnic composition of Central Asia began to change as the Turko-Mongolian peoples began to penetrate into western Central Asia.

The westward movements of peoples across Central Asia began at the beginning of the 2nd century BCE when a Turko-Mongolian people, called by the Chinese the Hsiung-nu, and known later in the West as Huns, began to move from their homeland in north east Mongolia. Some moved south into China, where they recognised the authority of the Han dynasty, others moved west towards the Volga and the Don passing, as they did so, through territory occupied by the Samartians and other tribes. On the lower reaches of the Don they clashed with the Alans in the years 370-380 CE and with the Goths of Ermenichus before moving through Panomania and on into Western Europe where under the leadership of Attila (434-453) they ravaged eastern territories of the declining Roman Empire. This was Europe's first experience of the steppe nomads: it would not, however, be its last.

Other Hsiung-nu moved into Gansu where they displaced an Indo-European speaking tribal confederacy living west of Tung-huang, whom Chinese sources call the Yüeh-chih and whom contemporary Western historians tentatively identify with the people referred to by Greek historians as the Tokhari.¹¹ Whilst some of the Yüeh-chih migrated into northern Tibet, the Great Yüeh-chih, as they are called in Chinese sources, migrated west and established themselves immediately to the east of the Syr Darya. When, in 128 BCE, the Han Chinese emissary, Ch'ang Ch'ien, came west to try to enlist their help against the Hsiung-nu, he found them so settled in the Ferghana valley and in the region immediately to the east of the Syr Darya that they had lost all interest in returning to avenge their earlier defeat. Shortly after this visit the Yüeh-chih crossed the Syr Darya and occupied the region between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, driving the Scythians or Sakas, who had previously resided in the region, west

¹⁰ Cf. Dani and Masson (Eds.), *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. 1, pp 24-26.

into Seistan, then a province of the Iranian Parthian (Arsacid) empire, and south into India. At about the same time the Yüeh-chih overran the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms to north of the Hindu Kush which had been established in the wake of Alexander of Macedon's conquest of the region in the 4th century BCE. This, however, was not the end of their expansion for, as the Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien records, the Yüeh-chih chief, Kujula Khudphises, having united the five tribes of the Yüeh-chih, led them over the mountain passes of the Hindu Kush and into the Indian subcontinent where they established themselves in Kabul and Kashmir, before moving south and east. By the turn of the millennium the Yüeh-chih were in the process of establishing a great dynasty – the Kushan – which by the end of the first century CE extended over an area which today constitutes Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzia, Turkmenistan, parts of west Turkestan north of the Pamirs, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, together with the whole of northern India and parts of eastern and central India.

Despite its vast extent and its not inconsiderable cultural achievements, the Kushan dynasty is one of the most neglected in the historiography of the Old World and yet as A. K. Narain has said, their two best known kings, Kanishka, and Huvishka, who ruled the vast Kushan realm at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century CE, set the pace for a fascinating cultural and religious synthesis which was, he claims, 'hardly matched in history.'¹² The Indian historian, Romila Thapar, is equally laudatory of Kushan achievements and has written that the Kushan period 'ranks as one of the significant phases in the cultural development of northern India.'¹³ We shall be returning to look at the religious culture of the Kushans in the next chapter.

¹¹ For the argument that the Yüeh-chih are to be identified with the Tokharians c.f. E. G. Pulleybank, 'Chinese and Indo-Europeans' in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1966, pp. 9-39.

¹² A. K. Narain, 'Indo-European's in Inner Asia' in Denis Sinor (ed.), *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, p. 167. For a brief discussion of the problems surrounding the dates of Kanishka's reign c.f. R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 202. Narain's statement regarding the historical neglect of the Kushans has to a large extent now been made good by the excellent chapters on them in Volume II of the UNESCO project *The Civilisations of Central Asia*. Cf. especially chapters 11-17, pp. 147-440.

¹³ Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1966, p. 97.

The military and political success of the Kushan state was made possible, not only by the fact that by the beginning of the common era the Parthians were a spent force, whilst the Chinese had retreated inwards upon themselves, but also by their having gained possession of the rich agricultural regions of Kabul and the Upper Indus Valley and by their having also gained control of many of the major cities at the western end of the southern 'Silk Road', thus making them important middle men in trade between the Roman Empire and China.

Kushan rule over western Central Asia lasted for about a hundred and fifty years. Their downfall was brought about by the expansionist policies of the Persians who, after the accession of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir I, in 224 CE, waged a campaign in the east which led to them occupying Seistan, Abarshar (modern Nishapur), Marv, Balkh, Sogdiana and Khwarazm. The Arab historian, Al-Tabari, writing towards the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth centuries, tells us that Ardashir received the submission of the King of the Kushans in 227 CE. For the next century the governors of Bactria, Khwarazm and Sogdiana would be appointed by the Sasanians. However, by the middle of the fourth century CE, serious Turko-Mongol penetration of the sedentary civilizations of the southern oases had begun and the Sasanians eventually lost control of Transoxania to a branch of the Hsiung-nu who, under pressure from their rivals, the Hsien-pi, had begun to move south into northern China and westwards into Central Asia. Eastern Europe was to feel the impact of this movement when, at the end of the 4th century, they appeared among the Alans and Goths on the plains of Southern Russia. The Avars, known from Chinese sources as the Juan-juan, also made their way westwards and soon after 560 CE gained control of the plain of Hungary. They brought with them both the stirrup and the sabre, neither of which had been used in European warfare before their time, but both of which were quickly adopted by the Byzantine armies.

The beginning of the fifth century CE saw yet another group of nomads from the eastern steppe invading Central Asia. These are the Hephthalites (sometimes referred to in Western sources as Chionites) who the Chinese

histories, the *Liang-shu*, *Pei-shu* and the early *Tang-shu*, say were descendants of the great Yüeh-chih who were originally call Hua before they adopted the name of a new chief. Yet the ethnicity of these people is still a matter of dispute with some scholars regarding them as Indo-Europeans and others as Altaic speaking Turko-Mongols. It has also been suggested that they were forced to move west by pressure from the Juan-juan, a powerful tribal confederation who dominated the region north and north west of China at the end of the fourth century BCE. But whatever their ethnic origin, and whatever the reasons for their westward migration, by the middle of the fifth century their presence is recorded in the lands both north and south of the Hindu Kush. They then appear to have divided into two major groups – a northern group who kept the name Hephthalite, and a southern group, known as Zabulites, who, at the beginning of the sixth century, under their ruler Toramana, took much of northern India from the declining Gupta dynasty. The northern Hephthalites, seeking to expand westwards, clashed with, and eventually overcame, the Sasanian rulers of western Central Asia and established for a brief period of fifty years at the beginning of the 6th century an empire which extended over Sogdiana, Khwarazm and Bactria. Their rule came to an end when the Sasanian king, Khosrau Anushirawan, entered into an alliance with yet another power which had emerged east of the Jaxartes, the T'u-chüeh, better known in the West as Turks. With their help he was able, in 557 CE, to throw off Hephthalite suzerainty over his eastern provinces. The Sasanians and the Turks then partitioned the old Hephthalite empire between them and for a brief period the boundary between the Iranians and the Turks was constituted by the Syr Darya. Although the Hephthalites were defeated by the Turks, they were never fully assimilated by them, but continued to sustain a semi-autonomous existence under Turkish suzerainty, as the Chinese pilgrim, Hsüan-tsang, noted during his travels through the territory in 630 CE.

The arrangements entered into at the end of the sixth century between the Turks and the Iranians did not last and there were many clashes between the two powers as both vied for control of Transoxania with the Turks taking advantage of

the growing hostilities between Iran and Byzantium. However, the power of the Turkic Khaganate, east and west of the Pamirs, was finally broken by China – that of the eastern Turks in 630 CE and that of the western Turks in 659 – but any planned Chinese advance further into Central Asia was hampered by troubles on their southern border with Tibet. Central Asia remained, however, under the nominal suzerainty of China until the Arab invasion in the seventh and eighth centuries. After an unsuccessful clash with the Arabs at the river Talas in 751 CE, China was never again able to exercise any real influence in Central Asian affairs west of the T'ien shan and the Pamirs. The Turks, on the other hand, remained a powerful counter-force to the Arabs in Central Asia.

Another group of Turks who were in the process of establishing an empire in the northern steppe in the eighth century were the Uighur who overthrew the Eastern Turkish Khaganate in 744 and established themselves on the banks of the Orkhon with a capital at Ordu-Baligh. This dynasty is of particular interest to historians of religions. In 762 CE their third Khaghan, adopted Manichaeism as the official religion of his kingdom – an event recorded in the famous inscription in three languages (Chinese, Sogdian and Turkish) which he set up at Qara Balgasun. After their empire was destroyed in 840 CE by the Kyrgyz, the Uighur were forced to migrate south westwards to the oases of the Tarim Basin – where they abandoned Manichaeism and embraced Buddhism. They then moved west into the present day Xinjiang-Uighur region of China. Finally incorporated into the Mongol Empire early in the thirteenth century, the Uighur bequeathed to the Mongols both their characteristic script and their rich scribal tradition. It was also about this time that the Uighurs abandoned Buddhism and embraced Islam.

It should now be clear that at the time of the Arab invasion Central Asia was in no sense a unified region. As we shall see in the next chapter, it was as culturally and religiously diverse as it was ethnically diverse, although in southern Central Asia cultural and religious diversity in no way coincided with ethnic diversity. Prior to the Arab Muslim conquest Central Asia was one of the first truly religiously pluralistic societies in history.

CHAPTER 2

CULTURE AND RELIGION

If Central Asia is hard to define in geographical terms, it is even harder to define in cultural terms, for the centre of the cultural life of the peoples of this region has constantly shifted as steppe empires have risen and fallen and as the fortunes of the great sedentary civilisations on its periphery have waxed and waned. Prior to the Arab conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries Central Asia had never developed a distinctive cultural identity, for the ingredients necessary for such a development, such as a common language, script, religion or race, were not found there; nor were any of the peripheral powers able to superimpose cultural hegemony from without.

Central Asia can be divided into three cultural zones: (i) the steppe regions beyond the Jaxartes, or Syr Darya as it is now known, (ii) the region between the Oxus (now known as the Amu Darya) and the Jaxartes, and known to Classical Antiquity as Transoxania and to the Arabs as *Mawara-al-nahr* – the land beyond the river – but which, for our purposes, will also include the lands to the immediate north of the Hindu Kush and which were known as Bactria, and (iii) Khurasan, situated west of the Oxus and east of the Dasht i Kavir desert in Iran – what French scholars aptly term *l'Iran extérieur*.¹

The steppes were early the home both to Indo-European and Turko-Mongolian nomads, the most prominent of whom were the Turko-Mongol Hsiung-nu from the Ordos and western Mongolia, the Tung-hu from eastern Mongolia and western Manchuria and the Indo-European Yüeh-chih from Gansu and the lands between Jungaria and the Ordos. Prior to the Arab invasion of the

¹ See Map 1

seventh and eighth centuries, and for some time afterward, many powerful nomadic peoples established their authority in the steppe, the most important of whom were the Hsiung-nu, the Yüeh-chih, the Juan-juan, the Hephthalites, the Türgesh, the Karluks, the Uighurs, and the Khazars – the only Turkic speaking people ever to have converted to Judaism – and the Penchenegs. These were not, however, the only powers in Central Asia prior to the Arab invasion, for there was also a flourishing Tokharian speaking culture centred on Kucha, Agni and Tufan, and a Saka speaking culture centred on Khotan, Kashgar and Tumshuq – all located in the Tarim Basin which today is part of the Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region of the People's Republic of China.

The history of Central Asia is to a large extent dominated by the interaction between the nomadic peoples of the steppe and the inhabitants of the sedentary civilisations on their periphery – with China to the East, Iran and Greece to the west, and India to the south, as well as with the somewhat hybrid cultural world of the city states which established themselves in Transoxania – Khwarazm, Sogdiana, and Bactria – and in the oases cities of the Tarim Basin. However, the commonly held view that the so-called 'barbarian' peoples of the steppe were little more than passive recipients of the more advanced cultures on their periphery is no longer tenable and a few words need to be said about the twin concepts of 'civilisation' and 'barbarism' which have dominated Western thinking for over two millennia. It is interesting that the Chinese drew a similar contrast. The great Chinese historian, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, for example, writing in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, a century after the construction of the Great Wall to protect China from invasion by the nomads had begun, wrote that 'inside are those who don the cap and girdle [i.e. the Chinese], outside are the barbarians.'²

The Greek word *barbaros*, from which the English term 'barbarian' is derived, is derived from an onomatopoeic Greek term, *bar bar*, used to describe

² Quoted by Denis Sinor in his Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, Cambridge, CUP, 1990, p. 17.

the speakers of tongues (or dialects) foreign to Greek ears.³ Whether the term as originally used had the pejorative connotations which were later to become so inalienably attached to it we do not know⁴, although Edith Hall has argued in her book, *The Invention of the Barbarian*, that the conception of the barbarian as 'other' arose only in the 5th century BCE when the war between the Greeks and the Persians was at its height.⁵ It was a war which made the inhabitants of the Greek city states more aware than they had been hitherto of what they had in common and in order to define what it meant to be Greek the invention of the barbarian 'other' became a conceptual necessity. Thus the term *barbaros* came to signify not simply those who did not speak Greek, but those who did not live or think like Greeks. This meant, above all else, those who did not live, as did the Greeks, as free men. As H. D. F. Kitto, put it: 'If we could ask a Greek what distinguished him from the barbarian, he would not, I fancy, put the triumphs of the Greek mind first ... he would say, and in fact did say, 'The barbarians are slaves; we Hellenes are free men'.⁶ The Chinese, by contrast, were more inclined to differentiate themselves from the 'barbarians' by reference to literacy, law and order. Knowing, as we now do, more about the way of life and the world outlook of the steppe nomads, this contrast can today be seen for what it is, namely a construct – perhaps, as we have said, a necessary construct – of those living in settled societies who had to have dealings with the nomads. The nomads, however, would have vigorously rejected the notion that they were not free men, or that they were lawless, and they themselves, in fact, had, their own notion of the alien 'other' living in what they regarded as effete settled societies. Writing they certainly lacked, but their oral traditions were rich in meaning and those

³ Thus in the *Iliad*, Homer uses the term *barbarophonos* (bar bar-speaking) to describe the language spoken by soldiers in the Carian army based in Asia Minor, although whether the language which they spoke was dialect of Greek or a completely foreign tongue is a matter for dispute among classicists.

⁴ For a discussion of this question c.f. H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951, pp. 1-12.

⁵ Edith Hall, *The Invention of the Barbarian*, Oxford: OUP, 1989.

⁶ Kitto, op. cit., p. 9.

versed in the oral tradition, as in many pre-literate societies throughout the world, were held in high regard.

The 'barbarians' made their first appearance in Western literature when Homer in Book XI of the *Odyssey* brought Odysseus to the edge of the known world where, he tells us, 'the fog-bound Cimmerians live in the City of Perpetual Mist'.⁷ However, the 'fog-bound' Cimmerians never quite made it into history. They themselves left no records and external sources tell us little beyond their existence, although Herodotus mentions a number of geographical locations named after them – the Cimmerian Straight for example.⁸ The most probable view is that they were an Indo-Iranian people who had migrated from Central Asia to the south Russian steppe around 1200 BCE. Sometime in the 8th or 7th centuries BCE they were displaced by (or absorbed into) a kindred people about whom we are comparatively better informed. These are the Scythians (or Sakas as they are known in Indian sources) to whom Herodotus devotes much of the fourth book of his *Histories* and whom he regards as also having originated in Central Asia.⁹ Herodotus tells us that there were two main groups of Scythians – the 'Royal Scythians' who inhabited the southern Russian steppe and the 'detached Scythians' whom he locates in the region of the Altai mountains.¹⁰ The Royal Scythians, he says, left their Central Asian homeland in the 7th century BCE as a result of pressure from a group of people whom he calls the Massegetae, whilst the 'detached Scythians' remained in Central Asia.¹¹ Three Central Asian specialists, E. Enoli, G. A. Koshelenko and Z. Haidary, have recently put forward the hypothesis that Herodotus' 'detached Scythians' of the Altai were the ancestors of the Yüeh-chih.¹²

⁷ Homer *Odyssey* (trans. E. V. Rieu), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1946, p. 175

⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, (trans. Aubrey de Sélicourt) Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 4. 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.11-20.

¹¹ Correlating tribal designations mentioned in Greek and Indian sources with those mentioned in Chinese sources has proved a difficult and, at times, an impossible task.

¹² E. Enoki, G. A. Koshelenko and Z. Haidary, 'The Yüeh-chih and their Migrations', Chapter 7 of Vol II of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, p. 177-18.

The steppe nomads, as has been stated appear in both Western and Chinese sources, as they do in the earliest strata of the *Avesta*, the sacred scripture of the Zoroastrians, as the enemies of 'civilisation'. Yet the contrast between the nomadic and the sedentary ways of life should not be drawn too sharply for pure nomadism was a rarity. Herodotus himself notes that many of the Scythians were farmers as well as pastoralists and we now know that the Scythians of the Pontic steppe were not an exception and that the flexibility which they practised was an integral feature of nomadic societies over the whole of Central Asia. As the well-known student of pastoral nomadism, Owen Lattimore, noted, whilst pure nomadism is theoretically possible, nomads in Central Asia have, throughout history, invariably entered into trading agreements with settled populations and raided only when times were desperate or when markets were closed to them. He wrote,

Pastoral nomadism is based on an economy which is capable of being entirely self-sufficient. Its own resources provide the essentials of food, housing, clothing and transport, even fuel (from cattle dung). Nor does it prevent the mining and working of metals on a small scale, as is known from the archaeological evidence. The steppe-nomad can withdraw into the steppe if he needs to, and remain completely out of contact with other societies. He can; but so rarely does he do so that this pure condition of nomadic life can fairly be called hypothetical. For every historical level of which we have knowledge there is evidence that exchange of some kind, through trade or tribute, has been important in steppe nomad life.¹³

It is also now certain that nomadic societies grew out of settled agricultural societies – and not the reverse – and that some at least of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia were the descendants of the Indo-Iranian bronze age cattle-breeding peoples who had inhabited Central Asia from as early as the fourth millennium BCE.

¹³ 'The Geographical Factor in Mongol History' in Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers 1928-1958*, Oxford: OUP, 1962, p. 253.

Nor, as was stated earlier, were steppe nomads as uncultured as they have often been portrayed as being. As the great Russian historian of the Steppe, A. P. Okladnikov, wrote:

The Steppe nomads of Inner Asia created their own spiritual world. In religion this was a rich dualistic mythology based upon the heavenly gods of light and the evil gods of the underworld. Heaven was honoured as the highest divinity. In art they created the dynamic animal style and monumental epic poems astonishing in their scope of fantasy ... Contrary to popular opinion, the nomads were not simply the enemies of progress; they were an influential force in universal history and the catalysts of many events. They not only took, but also gave a great deal to their neighbours.¹⁴

In a similar vein, a more recent scholar, Devin DeWeese, has advised students of Central Asia not to lose sight of 'the rich diversity and conceptual depth of the mythic and religious world created by Inner Asian peoples.'¹⁵

THE EARLY RELIGIONS OF THE STEPPE

Of the religion of the Indo-Iranians, or Aryans (the noble ones), as they called themselves, who lived on the steppe during the second millennium BCE we know very little. However, the English Iranist, Mary Boyce, has argued that we can re-construct their religious outlook by comparing the earliest strata of the *Avesta* – the sacred scripture of the Zoroastrians – with the earliest strata of the *Veda* – the sacred scripture of the Hindus – for both appear to derive from a common core.¹⁶ 'For thousands of years' she wrote,

it seems, the Indo-Iranians lived together as nomads on the broad Asian steppes, stretching from the lower Volga eastward to the

¹⁴ A. P. Okladnikov, 'Inner Asia at the Dawn of History' in Denis Sinor (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, p. 95

¹⁵ Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*, University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994, p. 28.

¹⁶ There are some scholars who today doubt the existence of a single Aryan or Indo-European homeland. For a full discussion of this question cf. Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1987, especially chapter 4, 'Homelands in Question'.

boundary of Kazakhstan. There they herded long-horned cattle on foot, moving slowly between pastures; and there they gradually evolved a common culture of such a strength that elements persisted as a shared heritage long after the two peoples had divided and gone their separate ways.¹⁷

And she added:

The fact that it is possible to draw so many parallels between the institutions, customs and ways of thought of the Vedic Indians and Avestan Iranians shows how powerful a formative influence the pastoral life had been which their ancestors lived together upon the Asian Steppes.¹⁸

As reconstructed by Boyce the religion of the Indo-Iranians was a highly developed polytheism, for the earliest strata of both the Iranian *Avesta* and the Indian *Veda* consists of ritual hymns which recount the achievements of the gods and goddesses in creating and sustaining the world.¹⁹ The supreme gods and goddesses were conceived as manifesting themselves primarily through the sun, moon and stars, although the sacred earth was also venerated. These gods and goddesses were thought of as acting together for the benefit of men and women, and men and women were expected to behave in accordance with their wishes and so preserve cosmic harmony. The most important group of divinities were the *Ahuras* (Sanskrit *Asuras*) – the Lords – who were the guardians of *asha*, (Sanskrit *rta*), the principle of order and moral rightness governing both the physical workings of the world and relationships within society. The opposite of *asha* was *drug* (Sanskrit *druh*), which means 'crooked or deceiving'.²⁰ Human beings were expected to live according to *asha* and to shun *drug*. Pre-eminent among the gods and goddesses was Mazda, the spirit of wisdom, and Mithra and Varuna who oversaw contractual obligations and enforced right conduct, but there were many lesser divinities, chief among whom were the god of the sacred narcotic drink *haoma* (Sanskrit, *soma*), Anahita, the goddess of water, Hvar Khashaeta, god of

¹⁷ Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 2 Vols, Leiden: Brill, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 3.

¹⁸ Boyce, *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Known in Avestan as *yashts* and in Sanskrit as *samhitas*.

the sun, and Verethraghna, the god of victory.²¹ It was believed that the gods made the world out of pre-existing material and brought it into being by seven separate acts of creation: (i) of the sky, which was made of stone and was conceived as a shell encasing the whole of creation, (ii) of the waters, which lay at the bottom of this shell, (iii) of the earth which floated on the waters, (iv) of a plant, (v) of an animal (a bull) and (vi) of a man. The seventh and last act of creation was fire, which gave warmth and life to the whole creation. When creation was complete the gods then sacrificed the plant, the animal and the man which, thus consecrated, generated, in dying, all the plants, animals and human beings which now people the earth. The gods also set in motion the sun – the greatest manifestation of fire – which began to regulate all life in the world according to the principle of *asha*. The duty of men and women was, through worship and sacrifice, to strengthen the gods and, by living according to *asha*, to help them maintain the cosmos – the ordered world. At death the majority of men and women went to a shadowy underworld, but the leading men – the chieftains and priests – looked forward to joining the company of the gods in their kingdom, *khshathra*, which lay beyond the sky. The Indo-Iranians also believed in evil beings, malevolent spirits, who, although they could do harm, had less power than the gods and could be warded off by the use of spells or be propitiated with offerings.

The hymns which are preserved in the Iranian *Avesta* and the Indian *Vedas* laud the activity of particular gods and would seem to have been used as texts in sacrificial rituals performed by a hereditary priesthood. They were transmitted orally in a fixed linguistic form, even as the vernacular language changed, and were thought to have a spell-like quality if properly pronounced within the context of the appropriate ritual. At this early period what the contemporary

²⁰ Mary Boyce, 'The Origins of Zoroastrian Philosophy' in Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam (eds.) *Companion Encyclopaedia of Asian Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 7.

²¹ For a selection of hymns (*yashts*) to these and other gods c.f. Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, Manchester: University Press, 1984, pp. 27-33.

Western world differentiates as magic, religion and science were part of a single unified world view.²² Whether the reconstruction of the early religion of the Indo-Iranians given by Boyce was indeed the earliest known religion of the western steppe peoples is open to debate, but that the high god Mazda was known to almost all the Iranian-speaking steppe peoples is beyond doubt.²³

There can be little doubt that the religion of the Scythians had much in common with the religions of other peoples of the steppe – the belief in a supreme deity or high god, more often than not identified with the sun, the veneration of ancestral spirits, the sacrifice of animals, particularly of horses, but also of humans to the war god (whom Herodotus calls Ares, and who was, he says, represented by an iron sword) and veneration of the sky, earth, fire and water. Divination was widely practised, often by using bundles of willow rods which were laid on the ground one by one, or by splitting the bark of lime trees and divining as the fibres were unwoven.²⁴

Grave finds by Russian archaeologists at Pazyryk in the Altai mountains in the 1950s have confirmed much of what Herodotus tells us about the religious and funereal customs of the Scythians.²⁵ In one grave, for example, preserved almost intact by the permafrost, the skin of a nomad ruler was still illuminated by dense patterns of lamp-black tattooing. His body had been stuffed with many of the herbs mentioned by Herodotus – cut marsh-plants, frankincense, parsley and anise seed. In one corner of the tomb the Russian archaeologists found a fur bag containing cannabis together with some bronze cauldrons filled with stones and the frame of a tiny four foot high inhalation tent. Herodotus had written:

After the burial ... the Scythians go through a process of cleansing themselves ... On a framework of three sticks, meeting at the top, they stretch three pieces of woollen cloth ... and inside this little tent they put a dish with red-hot stones in it ... They take some

²² C.f. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor Books, 1962, for an account of the rise of the modern meaning of the term 'religion'.

²³ Cf. J. Harmatta et al in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. II, pp. 315-316.

²⁴ Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995, p. 93.

²⁵ Cf. M. P. Gryaznov, *Arzhan: Tsarskiy kurgan ranneskijskogo vremeni*, Leningrad, 1980.

hemp seed, creep into the tent, and throw the seed upon the red stones. At once it begins to smoke, giving off a vapour unsurpassed by any vapour-bath one could find in Greece. The Scythians enjoy it so much that they howl with pleasure.²⁶

His sentences had to wait two and half millennia for confirmation. Historians today are rather more inclined to take seriously what Herodotus says about the Scythians than they were a century or so ago.

The beliefs of the Turkic and Mongol peoples were not so very different from, if perhaps, not so highly developed, as those of the Indo-Iranians. Something of their cosmology can be gleaned from the runic inscriptions in honour of Kül-tegin and Bilge kaghan carved in 730 CE where it is written that:

When high above the blue sky was created and down below the brown earth had been created, between the two were created the sons of men. When this took place, the heaven rose up like a roof above the earth.²⁷

Who actually created the world is not stated. The rising sun was worshipped and the east was considered the most important direction. The doors of the Turkish kaghan's tent always faced east. The earth was considered to be square and the kaghan's headquarters were held to be at its centre. The Turko-Mongol peoples thought of the universe as divided into three parts – heaven, earth and a lower or underworld. The lord of the underworld was Erklig. He was opposed by Tengri the Lord of Heaven and the supreme god of the Turko-Mongolian pantheon. It was Tengri who upheld the cosmic order and who determined the destinies of men and women. High mountains and tall trees were often dedicated to him and, according to Chinese sources, it was upon the high mountains that prayers and sacrifices were offered to him. Tengri's divine consort was Umai (for the Mongols Ütügen), the goddess of fertility and protectress of the

²⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, IV:74-75

²⁷ Quoted B. A. Litvinsky in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. III, p. 429.

new born. Prayers and sacrifices were also offered by the Turko-Mogols to the sacred Earth and Water of the middle world in which men and women lived.²⁸

A more recent attempt by a leading American student of Central Asia, Devin DeWeese, to supplement our knowledge of the indigenous religious world-view of the Turko-Mongol nomads on the basis of the oral epic tradition, supplemented by ethnographic studies of the Turko-Mongolian and Siberian peoples, emphasises the centrality of familial rites and rituals in their religions.²⁹ This leads him to question the ethnographic designation of the indigenous religion of the steppe as 'shamanism' for this, he believes, distorts the place which domestic and tribal rites played in the religious life of the peoples of the steppe.³⁰ By concentrating on the ecstatic performances and personal religious journeys of the shaman, ethnographers have neglected, says DeWesse, the more important personal and communal rites of the Central Asian peoples. 'Inner Asian religious life', he writes,

is much richer and more diverse than the label "shamanism" suggests. However extensive a role the shaman may play in explaining elements of this domestic cult, or in officiating at communal versions of ancestral rites, or in "mobilising" a community to observe certain norms, the fact remains that the ancestral and communal focuses of Inner Asian religion were customarily more directly linked with the daily lives of most people – affecting their conceptions of individual and communal "health" and soundness, affecting their life-supporting economic activities, from hunting to animal husbandry to agriculture, which ancestral spirits were believed to protect, and affecting their individual status as members of a family and their conceptions of

²⁸ C.f. J. P. Roux, 'Tängri: Essai sur le Ciel-Dieu des peuples altaïques' in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, Vol. 161/1-2, 1956-57 and 'La Religion des turcs de l'Orkhin des vii^e et viii^e siècles' in *Revue de l'histoire religions*, Vol. 161/1-2, 1962; L. P. Potapov, 'K voprosu o drevnetyurkskoy osnove i datirovke altayskogo shamanstva' in *Etnografya narodov Altaya i Zapadnoy Sibiri*, Novosibirsk, 1978.

²⁹ Devin DeWeese, op.cit., As used by DeWesse 'Inner Asia' includes what we have defined as Central Asia together with substantial portions of Siberia as well as parts of European Russia. Cf. p. 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 32-39.

belonging to a particular tribe or "nation" – than were the ecstatic performances or personal religious journeys of the shamans.³¹

This focus on communal rites is borne out, as DeWeese demonstrates, by an examination of the mythology of the steppe nomads which was not primarily concerned, as was the mythology of the Indo-Iranians, with the origin of the Cosmos. The mythology of the Turko-Mongol peoples of the steppe is almost exclusively concerned with the origin of the peoples themselves and with the tribal groupings to which they belong, together with rites and rituals which serve to maintain material and social life – that is, with success in the hunt or agriculture, with fertility, and with the preservation of social identity and social cohesion. In this ancestral and totemic spirits, as in many other parts of the world, played a crucial role.

Central to these familial and communal rites were the ancestors and the sacred hearth where they were believed to dwell, and accounts of medieval travellers and of modern ethnographers bear witness to the place that the fire burning in the hearth holds among the Turko-Mongolian peoples of Central Asia. It was here that sacrificial offerings and libations were offered to the ancestral spirits for the material and social preservation of the family and the tribe. The symbolism of the hearth is also linked by a complex network of symbolism to the wider cosmology of the Turko-Mongolian peoples.³²

Deweese's cautionary remarks regarding 'shamanism' notwithstanding, here is no doubting that the shaman was an important religious figure among the Turko-Mongolian peoples, certainly in times of crisis. How early shamanism as we know it appeared on the steppe is a matter for dispute, with some scholars arguing that shamanism (at least in the form in which we know it today) only entered the steppe in the eleventh century CE via Buddhist influences emanating from the oases cities of the Tarim Basin. Such scholars argue that the term itself is not, as has traditionally been maintained, an indigenous Tungus term, but that it is

³¹ Ibid., p. 35.

derived from the Sanskrit *sramana* or the Pali *samana*. If this is so it may well be that shamanism in the form in which we know it, and more particularly in those elements where the Siberian and Turko-Mongol shaman differs from shamanism as found in other parts of the world, [where the shaman simply conveys messages from the spirit world to the world of the living] may provide yet another example of that religious syncretism which, as we shall see shortly, was such a marked feature of religions in Central Asia. As David Christian has written: 'If those who argue that the term 'shaman' is derived from Sanskrit or Pali are correct, then it [shamanism] probably reached Siberia through the Tocharian and Chinese languages carrying a heavy freight of Buddhist belief and ritual', and he concludes:

There is no need to take extreme positions in this debate. We have ... evidence, reaching back into the palaeolithic era, that practices similar to those of modern shamanism, have ancient roots. However, it is also true that as lifeways and social structures changed, so did views of the Universe. Small-scale societies, in particular, were influenced by the appearance of societies whose lifeways and social structures were very different from their own. It is not just that they felt the influence of other religions; the very structure of their cosmos changed. In larger communities, many human contacts were indirect, and all contacts were affected by the emergence of hierarchies of rank, wealth and power. The spirit world, too, acquired ranks and gender and status, official rituals, and bureaucratic rules of diplomacy, so that relations with it became more formal and indirect, less personal and intimate. In larger societies, there emerged religious specialists who mediated less directly with the spirit world, knowing all too well the great distance between themselves and the ruling spirits of the other world. These, we commonly describe as 'priests'. One of the central themes of religious life in Inner Eurasia where small-scale communities co-existed with much larger communities for long periods, is the complex balance between the lesser and greater gods, and the shamans and priests who specialised in dealing with them.³³

³² Ibid., pp. 39-50.

³³ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, Vol. I., *Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire*, 1998, p. 65.

The term 'shaman' entered European ethnographic literature through the seventeenth century Russian priest and exile, Avvakum, who gives one of the earliest recorded accounts of a shamanistic trance in Western literature. Describing how a Russian officer forced a Tunguz from a settlement near modern Chita to *shamanit'*, or tell their fortune, he wrote:

... in the evening [the] wizard ... brought a live sheep and began to work magic over it: he rolled it to and fro for a long space and then twisted its head and flung it away. Then he began to jump and dance, and invoke devils, and, giving great screams the while, he flung himself upon the earth, and foamed at the mouth; the devils were pressing him, and he asked of them: 'Will the expedition prosper? And the devils said: 'It will return with much booty, having gained a great victory.'³⁴

Avvakum, who, as a Christian priest, regarded the shaman as an instrument of the devil, prayed that God would destroy the entire expedition. When all but one of the expedition were in fact killed he took this a sign that his prayers had been answered and his own faith vindicated.

There are even earlier accounts in Arabic literature of the activities of the shamans and all, like Avvakum's, stress the foretelling of the future. Thus the 12th century Islamic geographer, al-Marwazi, wrote:

Among the Kirghiz is a man, a commoner, called *faghinun*, who is summoned on a fixed day every year; about him there gather singers and players and so forth, who begin drinking and feasting. When the company is well away, this man faints and falls as if into a fit; he is asked about all the events that are going to happen in the coming year, and he gives information whether crops will be plentiful or scarce, whether there will be rain or drought, and so forth, and they believe that what he says is true.³⁵

³⁴ Quoted Christian, op. cit., p. 59. Cf. S. A. Zenkovsky, *Medieval Russian Epics, Chronicles and Tales*, New York: Penguin Books, 1974, pp. 422-3.

³⁵ Cited in J. A. Boyle, *The Mongol World Empire, 1206-1370*, London: Variorum Revised Editions, 1977, p. 180.

Soothsaying is, of course, found the world over and the term 'shaman' is today used by both social anthropologists and historians of religion as a general term for religious specialists in traditional and, indeed, in contemporary societies, who practice this 'art'. There are, however, certain unique features to Siberian and Turko-Mongolian 'shamanism' and these should be noted, the most important being that the shaman is believed by the Turko-Mongols not just to be able to communicate with the spirit world, but to some extent to *control* it. As the classical study of Siberian shamanism by S. M. Shirokogoroff has shown, the potential shaman is more often than not marked out by a traumatic episode – usually a dangerous illness – and if he or she can bring the spirit causing the illness *under control*, and can enter into ecstatic states, then he or she is recognised as a shaman.³⁶ As in other forms of shamanism found throughout the world ecstatic states can (and more often than not are) induced through rhythmic drumming and dancing and through the use of drugs.³⁷ It should also be noted (*contra* Mircea Eliade) that in Siberian and Turko-Mongolian shamanism the spirits which the shaman controls are both good and evil.³⁸ The shaman can voyage to either to the upper world of the good spirits or to the underworld where the spirits of evil dwell. The threat to the individual or to the community is removed by the shaman taking into him or herself the potentially destructive spirits and, by controlling them, neutralise their potential for causing harm. To refer again to Shirokogoroff:

The term shaman, in all the Tungu languages, refers to persons of both sexes *who have mastered spirits*, who at their will can

³⁶ S. M. Shirokogoroff, *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, London: Vegan Paul, 1935.

³⁷ For a study that links ancient and contemporary forms of 'shamanism' cf. Ioan Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*: Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991.

³⁸ Eliade in his influential study, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974 (originally published in French in 1951) argues, 'against observation' according to the author of the article on 'Shamans' in the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, that the specific element in Shamanism wasn't the control of the spirits, but the ecstasy provoked by the ascent in the sky or the descent into the underworld. He also, according to the same author, attempted – again with no observational warrant – to distinguish 'pure' (or 'white') shamanism, in which the shaman consorted with good spirits from 'black' shamanism where battle was joined with the evil spirits of the underworld.

introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people who suffer from the spirits; in such a capacity they may possess a complex of special methods for dealing with the spirits.³⁹

Little is known of the religion of the Hsiung-nu. David Christian suggests that it was an amalgam of indigenous religious practices, including early forms of shamanism – there has been found, as he notes, what looks like a shaman's head-dress in the Noin-Ula tombs – together with animal sacrifice, particularly of horses, and various forms of ancestor veneration.⁴⁰ The great ruler of the Hsiung-nu at the time they enter on the world stage, Mo'tun, is recorded in Chinese sources as praying to the sun each morning and to the moon each evening, as well as officiating, with his tribal chiefs, in offering animal sacrifices to the gods.⁴¹ Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote:

In the first month of the year the various leaders come together in a small meeting at the *shan-yü*'s court to perform sacrifices, and in the fifth month a great meeting is held at Lung-ch'eng at which sacrifices are conducted to the Hsiung-nu ancestors, Heaven and Earth, and the gods and spirits.⁴²

In the Chinese records there are also signs of an increasing importance being attached to the notion of the gods of the heavens (*tngri*) that would become so central a feature of later Mongolian religion and of which the highest god was *köke tngri* – eternal heaven.⁴³ The traditional title of the *shan-yü* already implied the blessing of heaven for the full title was 'Tang-li-ku't'u Shan-yü' which meant 'Great Son of Heaven' – an obvious example of Chinese influence for this was the traditional title of Chinese rulers. Similarly Hsiung-nu shamans were recorded as

³⁹ Op.cit., p.269, My emphasis.

⁴⁰ Christian, *History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, Vol. I., p. 195.

⁴¹ N. Bichurin, *Sobrabiye svedeniya o narodakh obitavshikh v Sredney Azii v drevniye vremena*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1950, p.50.

⁴² Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Records*, 2: 164.

⁴³ W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1980, pp. 4-6.

having used, like their Chinese counterparts, cracks in the burnt shoulder bones of sheep to divine the future.⁴⁴

Of the traditional religion of the Yüeh-chih we again know very little, but that it was not Zoroastrianism, as was once maintained, now seems beyond doubt, for there is no evidence that Zoroastrianism, in whatever form it might have then existed, had spread to the lands occupied by the Yüeh-chih prior to their westward migration. However, the Hungarian Iranist, J. Harmatta, has shown that there is strong linguistic evidence to support the fact that the name Ahura Mazda, at least, was known to the Yüeh-chih as, indeed, it was to other Iranian steppe peoples, as the name of a solar divinity. It would thus appear that the Yüeh-chih, along with other Indo-Iranian steppe peoples worshipped Ahura Mazda long before their acquaintance with Zoroastrianism. Linguistic evidence can also establish, Harmatta maintains, in a passage that offers some support to Mary Boyce's thesis that at least some of the Indo-Iranian peoples of the steppe were also acquainted with Mithra, Arayman, Vayu, Asa, Yama, Verethragna, Spenta Armataiš and the cult of the sacred drink Haoma or Soma.⁴⁵ His conclusion is worth quoting. He writes:

Consequently pre-Zoroastrian religion, which we deduce from the evidence of common Indo-Iranian (Avestan and Rigvedic) religious terminology, probably flourished only in the eastern territories adjacent to the area inhabited by the ancient Indian tribes, while the religion of the Iranian nomads living in eastern Europe and Central Asia may have had other peculiar features.

And he adds:

Essentially the Sakas and the Kushans who invaded Graeco-Bactria may have had similar religious ideas and cults to the population of Sogdiana and Bactria in pre-Zoroastrian times. They probably worshipped *Ahuramazdah* as 'God of Heaven' with solar features and *Svanta Armati* as 'Goddess of Earth'. They were acquainted with several categories of divine beings such as *daivas*, *yazatas*, and *bagas*; and used the verb *yaz-* as a term for sacrifice

⁴⁴ Cf. N. Ishjants in *History of Civilizations in Central Asia*, Vol. II., p. 165.

⁴⁵ Harmatta, op.cit., p. 315.

and worship, and the words *baga-spasika-* and *baga-pati-* to denote different categories of priests.⁴⁶

Similar views, according to Chinese sources, also characterised the traditional religion of the Hephthalites. The manuscripts of Book 54 of the *Liang shu* tells us that the Hephthalites (known to the Chinese as I-ta) worshiped T'ien-shen, the god of Heaven and Huo-shen, the god of fire.⁴⁷ Once established in the sedentary oases of southern Central Asia, however, the traditional beliefs of both the Yüeh-chih and the Hephthalites appear to have given way to, or to have taken into their world-view, beliefs and practices drawn from the Greeks, Buddhism, Hinduism and Iranian Zoroastrianism.

ZOROASTRIANISM

The history of Zoroastrianism is perhaps the most difficult of all the world religions to trace.⁴⁸ The most probable view is that what we now know as Zoroastrianism began to evolve out of the old religion of the steppe at some point in the 6th century BCE in the eastern Iranian cultural area. The date of Zarathushtra's reform of the old Indo-Iranian religion of the steppe is, however, difficult to determine with scholars being divided between those such as Mary Boyce, who argue for a very early date – sometime between 1700 and 1500 BCE – and those who prefer a date nearer to the traditional date given by Zoroastrians themselves of the sixth century BCE.⁴⁹ This later date is also the one given by the great 11th century Muslim scholar al-Biruni who, in his work *Al-Khanun al-Mas'udi* (The Canon of al-Mas'udi), gives a date for the beginning of Zarathushtra's ministry 276 years before the beginning of the Seleucid age or, in the Zoroastrian calendar, 1218 years before the year of Yazdگرد III. Bearing in

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 316.

⁴⁷ There is no reference in Prof. Thrower's manuscript. A recent edition of the *Liang Shu* listed in the catalogue of the Cambridge University Library was published in Haikou in 1996.

⁴⁸ For the difficulties involved cf. . Duchesne-Guillemin's chapter on 'Zoroastrian Religion' in the *Cambridge History of Iran* 3(2), pp. 866-908.

mind that al-Biruni believed that the Seleucid age began in 310 BCE, and not in 312, and considering the date that he gives based upon the Zoroastrian calendar, the conclusion to be drawn is that, according to the information al-Biruni had collected by the time he came to write the *Canon*, he regarded the date for the beginning of Zarathushtra's ministry as 586 BCE.⁵⁰ This date has, however, been contested and the generally agreed date today for Zarathushtra's ministry, based primarily upon the archaic nature of the language of the *Gathas*, the earliest strata of the *Avesta* and believed by scholars to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself, is about 1000 BCE.⁵¹ – that is *after* and not before the Indo-Iranian peoples split and went their separate ways.

But whatever his date, the ministry of Zarathushtra himself would appear to have been crucial in the formation of the religion which eventually came to bear his name, even though in the earliest references we have in Iran to the worship of Ahura Mazda, namely the rock inscriptions of Darius (521-485 BCE), the name of Zarathushtra is not mentioned. It is for this reason that many scholars prefer the term Mazdaism, rather than Zoroastrianism, for the religion which was the state religion of the Archaemenid and the Parthian dynasties of Iran. The *mobed* (high priest or chief magus) Kartir, who fought hard during the early Sasanian period to make Zoroastrianism the state religion of the Sasanian empire, proclaims, like Darius, in the rock inscriptions which Shapur I (243-72 CE) allowed him to carve at Naqs-i Rostam, Naqs-i Rajab and Sar Mashhad, the sole supremacy of Ahura Mazda, but he too never mentions Zarathushtra, yet it was under his jurisdiction that the elaboration and systematisation of Zoroastrianism, with its hierarchical priesthood and centralised administration, was begun. Towards the end of the Sasanian period a further step towards consolidating

⁴⁹ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Al-Biruni, *The Canon of Mas'ud Books 1-5*. Introduction, translation and notes in Russian by P. G. Bylgakov and B. A. Rozenfelt with the collaboration of M. X. Rozhankaya (translation and notes), *Selected Works*, Vol. 5 Chapt. 1, Tashkent, 1973.

⁵¹ So R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996, pp.68-69.

Zoroastrianism was taken during the reign of Khusrau I (531-579 CE) when the oral tradition began to be transcribed into a phonetic script based on Pahlavi (the script current at the time) and a corpus of written scriptures came into being. It was a process that was only completed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by Zoroastrian emigrants to India later to be known as 'Parsis' or Persians. However, the writing down of the oral tradition begun under the Sasanian dynasty, allowed the Muslim conquerors of the Sasanian empire to regard the Zoroastrians as 'Peoples of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*) and to be treated, with perhaps some reservation, therefore, in a not dissimilar way to Jews and Christians.

From the evidence of the *Gathas*, the seventeen hymns which form the core of the *Yasna* or book of worship in the *Avesta*, and which, as have said, almost all scholars are agreed were composed by Zarathushtra himself, Zarathushtra would appear to have been a *zaotar* (sanskrit, *hotar*) or priest – the only founder of a major religion to have been such.⁵² He was also, however, a prophet who rejected the polytheism of the religion of his day and proclaimed the supreme and, ultimately, the sole power of Ahura-Mazda (the Wise Lord) with whom he believed himself to be in personal contact. He also taught that evil was due to the activity of the twin spirit of Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu. Ultimately, Zarathushtra maintained, Ahura Mazda would triumph over his evil twin and would reign supreme. Meantime, human beings were called upon to support Ahura Mazda in his struggle with Angra Mainyu by doing good and shunning evil, and by following what Zarathushtra called 'the good religion'. Their success in this would also determine their own ultimate destiny after death.

From the evidence of the *Gathas* Zarathushtra's 'monotheism' was not, however, the monotheism that we find, for example, in the later strata of the *Book of Isaiah* in the Hebrew Bible in which the sole supremacy of Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, is asserted, for unlike the unknown prophet whose words are recorded in chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah, Zarathushtra does not deny the

existence of other gods: rather he places them in a derivative and subordinate position to the supreme God, Ahura Mazda. They are *yazatas* (beings worthy of worship), but thought of by Zarathushtra, if not always by his followers, as manifestations of aspects of Ahura Mazda.⁵³ Zarathushtra does, however, as has been mentioned, postulate a co-equal with Ahura Mazda, his evil twin, Angra Mainyu, and there is thus a dualism at the heart of Zoroastrianism not found in the Hebrew prophets, nor later in Islam, although the figure of Satan in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an may well owe something to Zoroastrian influence.

As so often in the history of religions where there was an established church, as Zoroastrianism became under the Sasanians, church and state offered each other mutual support, with Zoroastrianism urging obedience to the *Shahanshah* and to the existing social structure and the state in turn suppressing heresy and persecuting alternative religions. Ardashir is reported as having issued the following admonition to his son Shapur I when the latter was about to ascend the throne:

[Remember] my son, Religion and the State are sisters. They cannot survive without each other. Religion is the buttress of the State and the State is its protector. And whatever is deprived of support crashes down and whatever is not defended is lost.⁵⁴

Shapur I, and his high priest Kardir, whose career reached its zenith in the years 273-293 CE under Shapur's immediate successors, worked hard to make this a reality. The result was an unprecedented period of persecution for the adherents of other faiths – particularly of Manichees, Christians and Buddhists.

⁵² For a recent translation of the *gathas* cf. H. Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, Heidelberg: Winter, 1991 (2 Volumes).

⁵³ In the later Zoroastrian tradition the term *deva* (Avestan *daiva*) which in the *Veda* means 'god', comes to be used in the opposite sense of devil; similarly the term *asura* in the *Veda* (Avestan *ahura*) is the term for a devil whereas in the Avesta it is the term for 'lord', as in Ahura Mazda – the wise lord.

⁵⁴ Quoted O. Klima, *Mazak. Geschichte einer sozialen Bewegung im Sassandischen Persien*, Prague, 1957, pp. 40-1.

THE RELIGIONS OF TRANSOXANIA

The region between the Oxus and the Jaxartes was in many ways a buffer zone between Iran to the west and the nomadic peoples to the north and its borders expanded or shrank according to the relative strengths of these powers. There were three important states in this region prior to the Arab invasion of the seventh and eighth centuries – Sogdiana, Khwarazm and Bactria.⁵⁵ Being on the periphery of Iranian culture all these states developed or preserved elements of their traditional religion and were only partially touched by the reformed Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran. As P. G. Bulgakov has written of Khwarazm:

Zoroastrianism was not a legally established religion in Khwarazm, as it was in Iran, and therefore did not follow strict canons. Both from Biruni's information and from archaeological evidence, it is clear that Zoroastrianism has a special character in Khwarazm, where it coexisted with survivals from earlier beliefs and local cults. Some of the manifestations of these were shared by pre-Islamic Sughd.⁵⁶

Bulgakov also claims that whilst Buddhism made little impact in Khwarazm, archaeological evidence suggests that there was a fairly large Christian community there.⁵⁷

Sogdiana comprised the oases of Bukhara, Samarkand and Panjikent, the city of Chach (called by the Arabs Shash and eventually renamed by the Turks as Tashkent, the 'city of stone') and the Ferghana Valley. The Sogdians, like their near neighbours the Khwarazmians, to whom they were probably related, were essentially a commercial people and Sogdian colonies could be found as far apart as Merv, the Semirechye, Mongolia and China. It was they who, both before and for some time after the Arab conquest of southern Central Asia, were the middle

⁵⁵ Cf. map 3. For the early history of these 'states' cf. N. N. Negmatov. Chapt. 18 'States in North-Western Central Asia' in Vol. II of *History of the Civilisations of Central Asia*, pp. 441-456. For more detail cf. chapters 9 and 10 in Vol. III.

⁵⁶ P. G. Bulgakov in Vol. III of *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, p. 226. Bulgakov provides a good deal of information on local cults – mainly drawn from al-Biruni's *Chronology* and his *Al-Qanun al-Mas'udi* (The Canon of Mas'udi) cf. pp. 226-228.

men in the lucrative trade between China and the West. The Khwarazmians, however, controlled the trade northwards into Russia and eastern Europe. Both peoples enjoyed a high level of culture as has been shown by Russian archaeological excavations which have unearthed a number of documents and inscriptions, as well as a number of wall paintings and artefacts indicative of daily life in the region. These excavations also show the existence of extensive walls and fortifications enclosing irrigated land. Within the walls there were villages and even towns, as well as large fortified villas and castles of the local aristocracy. However, as Richard Frye has pointed out, whilst one could speak of imperial Kushans, one can not speak of imperial Sogdians, for the Sogdians, as far as we know never created a large centralised state in Central Asia.⁵⁸

Almost all of the major religions of the Old World were represented among the Sogdians, although their original religion, as of the Khwarazmians would appear to have been a version of the unreformed religion of the steppe focused on the worship of the solar deity Ahura Mazda and Savanta Armati, the Goddess of Earth, although many other deities, particularly those associated with the river Oxus, would also appear to have been worshipped, together with worship (or veneration) of ancestral spirits. Certainly their Zoroastrianism, if, indeed, it could be called that, was different from the Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran for it had nothing of the centralised hierarchical structure of the Sasanian state religion and it had none of the intolerance of other religions which, as we have seen, became a feature of Zoroastrianism in Sasanian Iran. Indeed, many Sogdians embraced Buddhism, Christianity and Manichaeism.

Balkh, the capital city of Bactria, was, on account of its antiquity, called by the Arabs 'the mother of cities', but today not a single stone of the city remains. However, it was in this region that a number of Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms came into being in the wake of Alexander of Macedon's conquest of the region in the fourth century BCE. Alexander died in 323 BCE and despite

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

rebellions on the part of his Greek troops, who wished for nothing more than to return to their homeland, his general Seleucus managed to re-assert order and to establish a Greek state – later to fragment into a number of Greek states – in the region. It was from here that Greek influence spread south into India and eastwards across Central Asia to China.

Alexander's conquests in Central Asia were recorded not only in the Pahlavi additions to the Zoroastrian scriptures (known as the *Zend Avesta*) where Alexander is cursed for destroying fire-temples, burning holy scriptures and murdering members of the priestly class, the Magi, but also by Greek and Chinese historians. It is, in fact, the first event in world history to be recorded in both Eastern and Western historical sources.

Despite the understandably negative references to this conquest recorded in the Zoroastrian scriptures, many Iranians in Central Asia came to so admire Greek culture that Greek influence in the region continued long after Alexander's death and the dismemberment of his brief Empire. It continued, in fact, to the end of the Parthian domination of Central Asia in the 3rd century CE – a period of well nigh half a millennium and tales of Alexander's conquests continue to this day to be a subject of storytelling in Central Asia.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GREEKS

One field in which Greek influence is particularly noticeable was in the minting of portrait coins. In Bactria the first independent Greek rulers coined their money in purely Greek style to conform to the Attic standard, but in northern India they issued a bilingual coinage exhibiting legends in both Greek and Kharoshti scripts. Numismatists are able to classify these coins (and the rulers depicted on them) in approximate chronological order by noting the progressive decline in the quality of the Greek lettering and design.

⁵⁸ Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996, p. 185.

A more lasting memorial to the Greek presence in Central Asia, however, was the development of the Gandhara school of sculpture in which the image of Buddha was given a rather startling Greek profile. Prior to this development Buddha had not been portrayed in human form, but only by such symbols as the lotus flower or by characters written in Sanskrit. The portrayal of Buddha in human form made its way from Bactria to China and is today, of course, a feature of Buddhism world-wide.

However, Greek influence had been felt well before Alexander's conquests in other spheres. Greek temples, with their traditional Greek sculpture and statuary, were built in cities in the Achaemenian Empire as far apart as the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf in the west and in the lands bordering the Syr-Darya in the east, and these no doubt influenced the introduction of the cult of images, first promoted in Zoroastrianism by Artaxerxes II (404-359 BCE), and which was, as a consequence of Alexander's conquests, further developed to the consternation of the more traditional Magi who held that the imageless cult of the fire altars was the only form of iconography appropriate to their reformed religion.

The Greeks attempted to understand and assimilate the religions of Eastern Iran (and of the steppe) by identifying the gods of these religions with their own gods. Thus Zeus was identified with Ahura Mazda, Heracles, the god of victory, with Verethgana, Apollo, the god of the sun, with Mithra and so on.

By the beginning of the common era many other religions were found in southern Central Asia, nor was Mazdaism, still less Zoroastrianism, the predominant religion, for by the beginning of the common era the predominant religion in southern Central Asia was Buddhism.

BUDDHISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Buddhism was initially a break-away movement from the Hindu tradition. It was founded by Siddharta Gautama (later known as 'Buddha' or the Enlightened One) in northern India in the 6th century BCE. With those

anonymous sages who, from about the beginning of the eighth century BCE, established Indian religion on an entirely new metaphysical footing, Buddha accepted the view, found in the Hindu *Upanishads*, that human beings are tied into an eternal round of birth and re-birth (*samsara*) from which it is desirable to secure release. For Buddha, the ills of the human condition were caused by attachment to the phenomenal world and his religion was, therefore, a form of therapy which sought first to break this attachment and then to finally release men and women from the round of birth and rebirth into a state of being which he called *nirvana*. Along with this went the preaching of non-violence and of compassion toward all living creatures – teachings which were to have quite considerable consequences on the ability of those who accepted them to defend themselves against their more aggressive neighbours. It was for this reason that the Turkish *kaghan*, Tonyuquq, in the latter part of the 7th century CE, forbade the propagation of Buddhism in the realms under his control on the grounds that ‘the teaching of the Buddha makes men weak’.⁵⁹

The Buddhist community did not long remain united and it soon fragmented into a number of sects. The Buddha appointed no successor and Buddhism has never had a central authority. As different communities established themselves in different parts of India local traditions developed. However mostly they remained in contact with each other. Early Buddhists travelled from centre to centre and went on pilgrimages to the sacred places associated with the life of the historical Buddha and in so doing exchanged opinions about his teaching. The problems which were discussed were common to all, as were the basic assumptions on which differing solutions were propounded. Thus, through constant contact, the central problems of Buddhism remained – at least in the early period – mutually intelligible to all Buddhists and it gradually became recognised that there were many paths to the same goal, namely the attainment of *nirvana*. However, as time went by, the sects developed their own forms of

⁵⁹ Bichurin, op.cit., p. 274.

organisation, differing over the strictness with which the rules of monastic discipline (*vinaya pitaka*) should be applied, and developed their own collections of scripture. A further cause of division was philosophy as Buddhists wrestled with some of the universal problems of philosophy – the nature of reality, the nature of causation, and the nature of the ‘self’ – as well as with particularly Buddhist problems such as the nature and person of the historic Buddha.

The first major split was between the *Mahāsanghikas* and the *Sthaviras* and was ostensibly over the status accorded to the *arhats*, that is to those monks who were held (or claimed) to be on the final stage towards enlightenment and who would not be reborn into this world. The real issue here seems to have been the place of the laity in Buddhism and their relationship to the *sangha*. In traditional Buddhism the laity were expected to accumulate merit by serving those who lived in the *sangha* and so acquire the merit needed for a better status – perhaps that of a monk – in the next round of their re-birth into the world. However, a teacher called Mahadeva taught that the *arhats* fell far short of the near Buddha-like status which was accorded to them. In the dispute which followed, the laity took the side of Mahadeva and, in consequence, the school called themselves the *Mahāsanghikas* (the large or great school) and their opponents, who claimed to be preserving the original teaching of the historic Buddha, called themselves the *Sthaviras* or ‘Elders’. Both schools continued to exist in India, with the *Mahāsanghikas* continuing to involve the laity more and more in the life of the *sangha*, thus becoming the channel through which popular aspirations and popular beliefs entered Buddhism. This is, perhaps, nowhere better illustrated than over the question of the nature and person of the historic Buddha, with the *Sthaviras* maintaining that the historic Buddha was simply a human being who had discovered the path to the Enlightenment and the *Mahāsanghikas* developing a doctrine in which the historic Buddha became the manifestation in human form of the eternal Buddha and was accorded something approaching the status of an incarnate god – a view which had obvious appeal to the laity. At a later stage this school became part of what became known as the

Mahayana tradition, a tradition which went on to develop the notion of the *Bodhisattva*, that is, of a celestial being who had delayed his entry into *pari-nirvana* – the *nirvana* of no return – in order to aid and help struggling humanity. Eventually the Bodhisattvas became celestial beings barely indistinguishable from the gods and goddesses of the other earlier polytheistic primal religions (as did the saints in the Christian tradition in Europe) who could be called upon to help human beings in all manner of situations. The departed spirits of the Sufi shaykhs, as we shall see, continue to this day to play a not dissimilar role in the lives of ordinary Muslims in Central Asia – and indeed they do elsewhere in the Muslim world, thus supporting the view that, at the level of popular piety, the primal religious tradition continues as a substratum in all the major world religions.

Mention of these early disputes in Buddhism serves to remind us that the schism within Buddhism to which we have referred eventually gave rise to two major Buddhist traditions, the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, and the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle, although this is not the name by which the various schools who made up the Hinayana tradition were known to themselves. The major school to emerge from the *Sthavira* was the Sarvāstivāda which, after the Great Council called by the Kushan king Kanishka in the first century CE, and which helped to bring order into this school, began to spread into Central Asia, although, ultimately, it would be the more popular Mahayana tradition which, because of its receptivity to local traditions and to influences from the other religions found in Central Asia, eventually came to predominate there and to develop new forms of Buddhism in both Central Asia as well as in China and, of course, supremely, in Tibet.

The spread of Buddhism beyond the boundaries of India into Bactria and Central Asia began during the reign of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (c.268 BCE). We know for instance that the Graeco-Bactrian rulers Demetrius and Meander patronised Buddhism, the latter achieving a lasting place in Buddhism in

the canonical text *The Questions of King Milinda*.⁶⁰ In the further propagation of both Buddhism and Indian culture into Central Asia an important role was also played by the Kushans for the main route of Buddhism's expansion into Central Asia ran through Bactria and the western possession of the Kushan empire which today form part of southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. From here it was carried eastwards along the trade routes to Kashgar and Khotan and the southern oases of East Turkestan – all of which were to become great centres of Buddhist learning – and on into China, a story told with great acumen by Xinru Liu in his book *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 100-600*.⁶¹ Liu also shows the influence that the merchant mentality had on Mahayana Buddhism. It encouraged the giving of alms to Buddha and the Bodhisattvas for journeys safely accomplished; from this it was an easy step to the view that it was possible to buy one's way to salvation. This resulted in the emergence in popular Mahayana Buddhism of the belief that the Bodhisattvas would accept precious gifts and give in return some of the excess merit which they had accumulated. A further example of the influence on Buddhism of indigenous Central Asian beliefs is the suggestion, made by K. S. Ch'en, that Zoroastrian influences can be detected in the notion of the Buddha 'Amithaba' or 'the Buddha of Infinite Light', popular in both Central Asia and China.⁶²

The route that Buddhism took to China was spectacularly demonstrated in the early years of this century by excavations conducted by, among others, Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot in the 'lost cities' of the Tarim Basin which proved conclusively that Sarvāstivāda (Hinayana) Buddhism had reached the oases cities of Tung-huang, Khotan, Kucha and Turfan as early as the first century CE.⁶³ These cities which, as Richard Frye has remarked, have received less than their due from history, were destined to play a not inconsiderable role in both the

⁶⁰ Cf. E. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1959, pp. 145-162.

⁶¹ Liu Xinru, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 100-600*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁶² So K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 15-16.

⁶³ Cf. Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*, London: John Murray 1980.

development and transmission of Buddhism in Central Asia and China.⁶⁴ All became centres of Buddhist learning where Buddhist scriptures were translated from the various Prakrits (and, later, from Sanskrit) into local languages and texts have been found in Khotanese, Tumshuqese, Kuchean (Tocharian B) and, later, Uighur. It has also been suggested that Christianity and Manichaeism, both of which had sacred scriptures, influenced this development, although the influence of the Chinese literary tradition should not be discounted. Khotan (Havatana), in particular, became a great centre of Hinayana Buddhism, although it was never a great missionary centre and the Khotanese language never became a major vehicle for the propagation of Buddhism. Later, however, as also at Kucha, Mahayana Buddhism supplanted Hinayana as the prevalent form of Buddhism both in these centres and in Central Asia and China.

Although the Kushans appear to have eventually come to favour Buddhism they began their rule in southern Central Asia and North India by assimilating elements from Greek, Indian and later Iranian religion. It was only during the reign of Kanishka in the first century CE⁶⁵ that Buddhism came to predominance among the Kushans, although this not mean that they neglected other religions. Buddhist, Hindu and a host of local Iranian deities figure on their coinage, but Kanishka clearly recognised the importance of Buddhism and there were important Buddhist centres in Bactria at Termez and Ayrtaam where missionary work on behalf of both the Mahasanghika and the Sarvastivada schools of Buddhism was carried out. However, as we have stated, Kanishka is remembered within the Buddhist tradition primarily for his having called a Buddhist council – the fourth – on the territory of present day Kashmir, which, among other things, fixed the Sarastivadin canon. The council also entrusted Ashvagosa with providing the correct language form for Buddhist writings. What,

⁶⁴ Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, p. 161.

⁶⁵ Some scholars would say Kanishka II. For a discussion of the problem of the rulers of the Kushan empire cf. Harmatta et al in Vol. III of the UNESCO *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, pp. 321-327.

in effect, Ashvagosa was asked to do was to re-write the Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit. Formerly both the *Mahasanghika* and the *Sarvastivadin* schools had used the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts to write Gandhari Prakrit. After the council both schools began to use Sanskrit, or to be more precise Hybrid Sanskrit written in Brahmi, in preference to Gandhari Prakrit written in the Kharosthi script.

Persecuted by the Sasanians in the third century CE and later by the Hephthalites after their occupation of Sogdiana in 440, Buddhism's demise in southern Central Asia came when the rulers of Bamiyan pledged their allegiance to Islam at the end of the eighth century, by which time, however, Buddhism had become firmly established in China. Here, after a number of set-backs, it became one of the major religions of that country – a position it holds to the present day. In the northern regions of Central Asia and in the Tarim Basin Buddhism continued to play an important role until the end of the tenth century when the area was concurred by the Muslim Qarakhanid Turks. It survived in Khotan, however, until the eleventh century.

Recent archaeological finds show that Buddhism and Indian culture permeated every area of Central Asia leaving direct evidence in the form of inscriptions and religious buildings as well as profound traces on the underlying cultural substrata of the local peoples. Its influence on Islam will be examined in due course.

Buddhism was not the only Indian religion to be found in Central Asia. During the period of the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdoms in north India and on the territory of present day Pakistan the worship of Vishnu and Shiva was also widespread, evidence of which is provided by the numerous Indo-Greek coins which have been found bearing the image of the humped bull, Nandi, on whose back Shiva was believed to ride. Often Shiva himself is portrayed accompanied by his consort Parvati. The linga, the symbol of Shiva, *par excellence*, was also widespread. It was, however, under Kushan rule that the worship of Shiva reached its height and many of the coins of the Kushan rulers bear symbols indicative of

the worship of Shiva. The worship of Shiva spread throughout the Kushan state reaching beyond the the Oxus into Transoxania. Recent excavations in Panjikent, for instance, have unearthed a number of wall paintings with Shivaite motifs, but which also contain the Sogdian name for Vayu (*Vyšprkr*) which would seem again to indicate that some form of syncretism between Shiva and Vayu had taken place.

Three further religions in Central Asia prior to the Muslim conquest must be considered before we close this account of the varied religious and cultural life of Central Asia prior to the advent of Islam. They are Manichaeism, Mazdakism – a revolutionary breakaway movement from the official state supported religion of Zoroastrianism – and Christianity.

MANICHAEISM AND MAZDAKISM

Before the spectacular finds in the sand - covered 'lost' cities of the Tarim Basin and in Egypt in the twentieth century little was known of Manichaeism beyond the polemical accounts found in the writings of its opponents. However, the discovery of fragments of the Manichaean scriptures together with some liturgical texts at Turfan and the finding of a tiny codex, known as the *Kaphalaia*, in Egypt, has transformed our knowledge of both Manichaeism and of its founder, Mani.

Mani was born in 216 CE at Mardinu in the Babylonian district of Nahr Kutha into a noble Parthian family who had fled from the political turmoil in Hamadan, where Ardavan V was vying for the throne with his brother Vologases V, and sought sanctuary in Seleucia-Ctestiphon, a city whose ruins lie today on the outskirts of Baghdad. Mani was brought up at Mesene, just north of Ctesiphon, in a religious community of white robed ascetics which his father, Patik, had abandoned both his mother and his job – legend says that he was a civil servant in charge of the canal system – to join. Many scholars identify this community with the heretical sect known to the Christian Church Fathers as the

Elkesaites, founded by Alchasaio in the second century CE.⁶⁶ The Arabs called them *al-Mughtasila* – the practitioners of ablutions. They would appear to have been a community of strictly monotheistic (perhaps Jewish-Christian) ascetics for whom water rather than fire was the means of purification – they are known to have held John the Baptist in particularly high veneration – and who practised strict vegetarianism, total abstinence from alcohol, celibacy, and held all things in common.⁶⁷

Mani seems to have become dissatisfied with the beliefs and practices of this community from an early age and to have felt called to found a new religion. At the age of 24 he left the community and, along with his father, began his own missionary activity. Proclaiming himself a prophet who had received his commission from the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit, and who continued to receive divine guidance from a being he designated his divine twin, he taught a faith which, he claimed, brought to fruition the partial insights into religious truth contained in Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity. Elements of all these faiths can be found in what became known as Manichaeism, although it might well be that Manichaeism adapted itself to the predominant religion in whatever area it was preached – to Christianity in the west and to Buddhism in the east. Thus in his first known work, the *Shahpuragan*, Mani wrote:

The wisdom and the good deeds have been manifested continuously by the messengers of God from time to time. Thus in one epoch, the true religion was revealed in the land of India by the prophet known as Buddha, in another in the land of Iran by Zardusht, and in another in the west by Jesus. After that the present

⁶⁶ For more on this sect cf. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasaï*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Press, 1985.

⁶⁷ Cf. the Cologne Mani-Codex in A. Heintichs and I. Koenen, *Ein Griechisches Mani Codex in Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Vol. 5, Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag GmbH, 1970, 94, 1-95, 14. The Elkesaites were a Jewish Christian group (similar to but not to be identified with the Ebonites) founded around 100 CE by one Alchasaio in the country east of Jordan. They revered especially the Gospel of Matthew and a number of non-canonical scriptures such as The Gospel of Thomas and the Apocalypse of Peter. It is possible that Mani's teaching concerning the repeated re-incarnations of Christ came to him via this sect. For a full discussion of what can be known about this sect and about Man's early life cf. G. Widengren, 'Manichaeism and its Iranian Background' in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2), 1983, pp. 965-967.

revelation descended ... through me, Mani, the messenger of the true God in the land of Babel.⁶⁸

A fragment found in Turfan shows that in the east many Manichees believed that Mani was the promised Maitreya of Mahayana Buddhism. The fragment reads:

Buddha Maitreya has come through Mani the apostle; he brought victory from God the righteous.⁶⁹

And, as Otakar Klima has shown, Chinese Manichees believed Mani to be the reincarnation of Lao-tze.⁷⁰ It was perhaps this ecumenism that attracted Shapur to Manichaeism, for it offered a way of overcoming some of the religious tensions which arose from time to time in an empire that embraced many different religions.

Yet the religion of Mani was not entirely new for its basis was the old Iranian dualism of the Light and the Dark, of Good and Evil, exemplified supremely in the conflict in human beings between soul and the body. As Mani himself wrote:

For they [those ignorant of his teaching] are not acquainted with the enmity between soul and body, they know not that the body hinders the soul in its ascent and is a prison and painful torture for her.⁷¹

The novelist C. P. Snow's comments on the attraction of Manichaeism to many in the ancient world are worth quoting. He wrote:

Of all the Christian heresies, one spread the farthest, touched imaginations most deeply, and had the richest meaning. Perhaps it should have been called a new religion. It was the heresy of Mani ... It was a new religion, but it drew its strength from something as

⁶⁸ Cf. Alfred Adam, *Texte zum Manichäismus*, 2nd edit., Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁹ Frag. IV, quoted in Otakar Klima, *Manis Zeit und Leiben*, Prague: Verlag der tschechoslowakischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1962, p. 242.

⁷⁰ Klima, *Ibid.*, pp. 268-9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

old and deep as human feeling; for, just as the sexual impulse is ineluctably strong, so can the hate of it be; the flesh is seductive, beyond one's power to resist – and one hates the flesh as an enemy, one prays that it will leave one in peace. The religion of the Manichees tried to give men peace against the flesh. In its cosmology, the whole of creation is a battle of the light against the dark. Man's spirit is part of the light, and his flesh of the dark. The battle sways from side to side, and men are taking part in it, here and now. The religion was the most subtle and complex representation of sexual guilt.⁷²

This may well be so, and to a large extent, owing to the inordinate influence on Western Christianity of St. Augustine of Hippo, this has been Manichaeism's chief legacy to the West, but there was more to Manichaeism than this and the eradication of the sexual instinct and, indeed, of all bodily passions – common to many forms of religion including Christianity and Buddhism – was but one element in a wider complex of belief and practice.⁷³

It is now generally recognised that Manichaeism was not, as was once thought, a Christian heresy for Mani deliberately intended to found a new religion and one whose fundamental tenets were derived not from Christianity, but from Gnosticism. As the library of Coptic Gnostic gospels found at Nag Hammadi in

⁷² C. P. Snow, *The Light and the Dark*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962, p. 39.

⁷³ Mani's teaching can now be largely re-constructed from his own writings which, for his followers, constituted a canon of sacred scripture. Although only fragments have been preserved these, together with what we know from secondary sources, allow us, according to Widengren to reconstruct Mani's teachings with a good deal of certainty. (Widengren in *CHI* 3(2), p. 972). The book *Shapurakan* is probably the oldest of Mani's writings. It is written in Middle Persian and is the only book by him written in an Iranian language. All his other books were written in Syriac, although Mani developed a special kind of Syriac which shows the influence of both the Edessene and Mandaean style of writing. The opening of the *Shapurakan* were quoted by al-Biruni and some original Middle Persian sheets were found in Turfan. The list of his works in Syriac are: *The Living Gospel* (of which nothing has been preserved); *The Treasure of Life* (of which a fragment has been preserved in al-Biruni's book on India and which tells us about the Kingdom of Light. Al-Biruni says that it had seven chapters and treats of Manichaean anthropology and psychology; *Pragmateia* (of which nothing remains); *The Book of Mysteries* (written against the Gnostic Bardesanes. Again nothing of this work has been preserved, although the *Fihrist* of an-Nadim gives us some of the chapter titles); *The Book of Giants* (of which fragments were found at Turfan – in Sogdian – which tell of the creation of the world) and *The Letters and Book of Psalms and Prayers* (A list of Mani's letters are preserved in the work of an-Nadim referred to earlier). Of Mani's non-canonical writings the *Kephalaia* which purports to record conversations between Mani and his disciples is the most important. Cf. Alfred Adam, *Texte zum Manichäismus*, 2nd edit., Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969. For the *Kephalaia* cf. H. J. Polotsky and A. Böhlig, *Kephalaia*, Vol 1., Stuttgart (1940) *Manichäische Handschriften der staatlichen Museen, Berlin* 1.

upper Egypt in 1945-6 shows Gnosticism was not simply a Christian heresy, even though many of the major Gnostic systems known to us were produced by those who thought of themselves as Christians. However, Gnosticism's fundamental outlook pre-dated Christianity.⁷⁴ The Nag Hammadi texts also show the extent to which Gnosticism was influenced by notions of the relationship between the human and the divine found in the Indian *Upanishads* and in Buddhism.⁷⁵ However the basis of Mani's religion, as of Gnosticism and Christianity, was the old Iranian myth of the place of human beings in the ongoing battle between the world of light and the world of darkness personified in the struggle between the divine twins Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) and Ahriman (Angra Mainyu). In the Manichaean texts in Middle Persian, however, the highest divinity is not called Ohrmazd, but Zurvan or Time.

Zurvanism, an intellectual movement within Zoroastrianism, probably came into being under Greek philosophical influence in the late Achaemenian period, although there are scholars who see it as being co-terminus with the rise of Manichaeism.⁷⁶ Zurvanism saw Time as the source and controller of all things and, where personified as a god, as being the father of both Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. Thus was the fundamental dualism at the heart of Zoroastrianism overcome and the essential unity of the world re-asserted. As well as appearing to undermine the status of Ahura Mazda, Zurvanism led to a doctrine of predestination which was at variance with the Zoroastrian notion of human beings as possessed of free-will. Hence it was designated by the Magi as heretical. From the point of view of the orthodox the heretical nature of Zurvanism was further established when some of its adherents declared that this present world was not

⁷⁴ Cf. J. M. Robinson (trans.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1977 and Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. Hans Jonas argues the case for Gnosticism as an independent world view in *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston Beacon press 1993). For the origins of *gnosis* cf. Carsten Cope, 'The origins of Gnosis' in *The Cambridge History of Iran* 3(2), pp. 836-840.

⁷⁵ Cf. Pagels, *op.cit.*, pp. 18-19 and Edward Conze, 'Buddhism and Gnosis' in *Le origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina* 13-18, April 1966, Leiden: 1967, p. 665.

just the battle ground of the war between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, but that it was actually under the control of Ahriman or Angra Mainyu. However, neither of these latter aspects of Sasanian Zoroastrianism were taken up by Mani.

Mani's initial attempt to preach his new religion in Media and India came to very little and it was only after receiving the protection (and even, perhaps, the patronage) of the Persian ruler Shapur I, that he was able to begin to preach his new religion in the Persian empire, although after the death of Shapur, Bahram II in 276, perhaps under pressure from the high priest of the now resurgent Zoroastrians, Kartir, had him imprisoned in Bet Lapat (Bishapur) on charges of sedition and where, early in 277, he died. However, his followers continued to grow and, under the pressure of persecution by the Zoroastrians, to spread his teachings both west and east of the land of its origin – west into the Roman empire where its most distinguished, if temporary, convert was Augustine of Hippo, and east into the furthest reaches of Central Asia. By the seventh century, the Central Asian Manichees had a certain autonomy, a large following, and many monasteries. They also had a leader or *archegos* based at Yar-khoto near Turfan. The rise of Islam drove a new wave of Manichees further eastwards and Manichaeism eventually reached China. Its most surprising success was when it became, if only for a brief period in the 8th century, the state religion of the Uighurs under whose patronage it was established in Inner Mongolia, the Tarim Basin and Xinjiang where it survived the persecution of foreign cults that occurred in China in the ninth century and remained active (largely as a secret society) until the sixteenth century.

Mani, like the Zoroastrians and the Gnostics, viewed the world in terms of two opposing principles, the light and the dark, symbolised as God, the Father of Light, and the Devil. Human nature was no exception. The souls of men and women shared in the light, that is in the divine; but in that they were also possessed of bodies, the seat of the passions, and more particularly of the passions

⁷⁶ Cf. S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*. London: SOAS 1994.

of lust, greed and envy, they also partook of the dark. To fight against the body and its desires was to help liberate the spirit from the body and ensure its return to the world of light from whence it had fallen. Mani also proclaimed that the light (the good) would ultimately triumph over the dark (evil) and that human beings could help bring forward that final victory by adhering to and practising his religion. The final victory of the Light over the Dark would take place only after the Last Judgement. This, Mani taught, would take place after a Great War when the spirit would finally be freed from the body and the particles of light would rise up to heaven and the carriers of darkness would be cast down to hell. This war would be followed by the second coming of Jesus who would conduct the Last Judgement in which those who merited a place in the kingdom of light would be separated from those who merited a place in the kingdom of darkness. After the Last Judgement both heaven and earth would collapse and a Great Flame would arise and all the particles of light in the world – in nature and in the animal kingdom – would finally be liberated. A new paradise would then come into being and evil would be forever fettered and incarcerated in a great stone.

Adherents of the religion of Mani were divided into two broad categories: the 'elect', who must pursue a life of celibacy, practice vegetarianism and abstain from alcohol; and the 'hearers', who were enjoined not only to live moderately, but to give alms to materially support the elect. If they did this then, at the final denouement of history, the 'hearers' would find themselves in heaven among the 'elect', or, where Buddhist influence prevailed, would find themselves one of the 'elect' in their next re-birth into this world. The debt which Manichaeism owed to Buddhism, a religion which also sought to dissociate men and women from the world and which elevated the monk (*bikkhu*) above the layperson on whom the duty of giving alms to the monks was laid will be obvious, but Manichaeism was also indebted to Zoroastrianism, which taught the ultimate meta-historical victory of the good. It is not surprising that a religion which sought to combine elements

from both these faiths would attract a great deal of support in Central Asia where both religions were found.

It was Mani himself who first made the decision to preach his religion as a world religion beyond the boundary of the Sasanian empire and it was Mani who personally directed missionary activity in Central Asia, sending his disciple Mar Ammo to Khurasan. There Mar Ammo mastered the Parthian script and translated Mani's doctrines into Parthian. Khurasan would remain the base for Manichaean missionary activity in Central Asia until well into the Arab conquest of the region. The commercial cities of Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent (Sash) also played a significant role in the dissemination of Manichaeism in the period prior to this conquest and Samarkand, in particular, was a major centre of Manichaeism from the 4th to the 7th century CE.

Manichaeism's greatest success in Central Asia was when, some time after 760 CE, the second Uighur *khaghan*, I-ti-chien, proclaimed Manichaeism the state religion of his people who were, at that time, living around the city of Lo-yang. Despite some initial resistance on the part of the Uighur elite, Manichaeism, in fact, remained the state religion of the Uighur until the collapse of the Uighur state in the face of Kyrgyz aggression in the ninth century. Whatever the reasons for I-ti-chien's espousal of Manichaeism, and various reasons have been advanced⁷⁷, his attempt, as we have said, was met with considerable resistance within the Uighur ruling elite. Considering that the Manichees banned the eating of meat and fish, it is hard to believe that this prohibition was taken seriously even within the capital and if we knew more it may well be that Uighur Manichaeism may provide yet another example of the adaptation by the pastoral peoples of the steppe of what was essentially a sedentary religion.

Whether the assassination of I-ti-chien in 779 had anything to do with his espousal of the religion of Mani is not known, but his successor, Tun (779-89), appears to have led a reaction against both Manichaeism and Sogdian and

⁷⁷ Cf. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, Vol. I., pp. 268-9.

agrarian influences.⁷⁸ This attack on Manichaeism, however, provoked a reaction against the Uighur on the part of Sogdian merchants throughout Central Asia and a sharp decline in trade followed. With the emergence of a new dynasty after Tun's death in 795 Manichaeism began to spread widely among urbanised ruling classes, although it is doubtful if it ever gained more than a superficial hold on the nomadic population. A priesthood emerged which took the dietary provisions so seriously that Chinese officials recorded that the Uighur 'drink water, eat strong vegetables, and abstain from fermented mare's milk'.⁷⁹ By the ninth century Manichaeism was widespread among the Uighur urban population – many of whom, however, may have been Sogdians. A Chinese report of 813 notes that 'Manicheans were trusted and respected among the Uighurs' and Tamin ibn Bahr reported that Manichaeism was the dominant religion in Ordu Balik when he visited the city.⁸⁰ The Uighur also sought to support Manichaeism beyond their own territory, persuading even the T'ang emperors to build Manichaean temples and to protect Manichees within their domains. One of the Uighur *kaghans* even threatened, when Muslims began to persecute Manichees in Samarkand, to kill all Muslims within his territory if the persecution continued.⁸¹

Manichaeism remained the state religion of the Uighurs until the fall of the Uighur kingdom to the Kyrgyz in 840 – in fact many have blamed the collapse of the Uighur kingdom on Manichaeism. Lev Gumilov, for instance, described the spread of Manichaeism among the Uighurs as a 'form of suicide', claiming that the espousal of the gentle, pacific religion of Mani undermined the warrior

⁷⁸ Cf. Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992, p. 160 and Colin Mackerras, 'The Uighurs' in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, p. 335.

⁷⁹ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynasty Histories*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, p. 109 and *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, p. 333.

⁸⁰ Minorsky, 'Timim ibn Bahr's Journey to the Uyghurs' in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XII (1948), p.283.

⁸¹ Cf. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, (Leiden Brill 1998), pp. 240-2.

instincts.⁸² However, David Christian's judgement is, perhaps, the more accurate for he sees the espousal of Manichaeism as indicative of a shift in Uighur society away from pastoral nomadism and military adventurism towards a more sedentary lifestyle where commerce, literacy and civilised luxury took precedence over traditional nomadic values and certainly, along with Manichaeism, the Uighurs acquired the Sogdian script, which, we shall see, they were eventually to pass on to the Mongols.⁸³ One by-product of this was the emergence of a rich Uighur literature in which Peter Golden has detected not only Manichaean, but also Buddhist and Nestorian Christian influences.⁸⁴

The Uighur state collapsed in 840 and the Uighurs scattered in many directions. Many went to the oases of Gansu and Xinjiang where in 866 they managed to re-establish a state which became one of the vital routes between China and Central Asia. Although Manichaeism lingered on, Buddhism, already well established in the region, now began to make inroads into the new Uighur state. Eventually, of course, like the rest of Central Asia, the Uighur would become Muslim.

Mazdakism was a heretical revolutionary movement within Zoroastrianism. It was founded in Persia in the fifth century CE by Mazdak i Bamdad, although Mary Boyce is of the opinion that Mazdak largely re-founded a religion originally taught by Zardust Khuraggan, a Zoroastrian priest who claimed new insights into Zarathustra's teachings shortly before the appearance of Mazdak.⁸⁵ At a time when ordinary Persians were burdened by heavy taxation consequent upon wars entered into by their rulers, Mazdak developed Zardust's essentially ethical and soteriological teachings into a militant movement which sought to abolish landed property as the basis of society, re-distribute wealth, free

⁸² L. Gumilov, *Drevniye turki*, Moscow: Nauka, 1967, p. 423. Cf. also Mackerras in *The Cambridge history of early inner Asia*, (ed. Denis Sinor), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, pp. 340-1.

⁸³ Christian, op.cit., pp. 270-1.

⁸⁴ Cf. Golden, op.cit., p. 173.

⁸⁵ Mary Boyce, art. 'Mazdak' in *Who's Who in World Religions*, (ed. John Hinnells), London: Macmillan, 1991, pp. 263-264.

women from the harems of the rich, and establish a community based on social justice, tolerance, love, and an ascetic way of life. This social ethic was set within the framework of traditional Zoroastrian teaching about the universal battle of the light and the dark and of the necessity for human beings to ally themselves with the forces of light and Mazdak's new community claimed to be allying themselves with the forces of light against the demons of envy, wrath, vengeance, need and greed. After initially finding support from Shah Kavād I, Mazdak and many of his close associates were murdered in 528 by Khusrau I and his followers were violently persecuted. However, the movement survived to influence some of the more extreme Shi'ii movements in Central Asia and in particular the revolutionary movement associated with the name of Muqanna' in the latter part of the eighth century.

NESTORIAN CHRISTIANITY

The last religion which we must consider is Christianity for this too was widespread in Central Asia prior to the Muslim conquest. Al-Biruni tells us that a Christian preacher was active in Merv as early as 200 CE, but Christians, we now know, were active in Iran much earlier.⁸⁶ Tolerated under the Parthians the Christian faith gradually spread eastwards and a list of bishops of the Syrian church in 224 includes a bishop of Dailam immediately to the south of the Caspian Sea. The Sasanians, however, having established Zoroastrianism as their state religion, began to persecute both Christians and Manicheans – persecutions which reached their zenith under the chief Magus, Kartir, towards the end of the third century. Yet the Christian community in Iran continued to grow aided by large numbers of Christians taken prisoner during the war with Rome. The head of the Eastern Church was the bishop of Ctesiphon, although his jurisdiction was not always recognised by other bishops in the east. At a synod held at Ctesiphon

⁸⁶ Cf. J. P. Asmussen, 'Christians in Iran' in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 3(2), ed. Ehsan Yarshater, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Vol. 3/2., pp. 928-32.

in 410 a bishop of the diocese of Abarshahr (Nishapur) is also recorded as having attended. Archaeological evidence has shown that Christian communities existed in Merv and in southern Turkmenistan from as early as the third century. The necropolis at Merv has several Christian tombs from this time and the ruins of a Christian monastery have also been uncovered. A veritable treasury of Christian gold medallions and plaques have also been discovered at Gëok-tepe and seals bearing the Nestorian Christian cross have been found at Ak-tepe in southern Turkmenistan.⁸⁷

It was from Iran that Christianity penetrated the steppe and the form of Christianity that this took was what became known among those who regarded themselves as true orthodox Christians as Nestorianism. As Denis Sinor has noted, Nestorianism was the only form of the Christian religion to make any impact on the peoples of Central Asia – something which both Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy singularly failed to do.⁸⁸ Nestorianism arose as a result of a debate in early Christianity about the nature and person of Jesus of Nazareth, with those who eventually triumphed maintaining that Jesus was not only God and Man, but that he was, at one and the same time, possessed of single, undivided nature. Nestorius, who was Patriarch of Constantinople in the first quarter of the fifth century, was held to have believed that two persons, the one divine and the other human, resided in the body of the historic Jesus, although doubt is now cast on whether this was what Nestorius actually believed. What is certain is that he refused to call Mary, the mother of Jesus, *theotokos*, the mother or bearer of God, for to do so, he believed, would be to deny the full humanity of Jesus. Nestorius and his followers were anathematised at a General Council of the Universal Church held at Ephesus in 431 and Nestorius himself was sent into exile in Upper Egypt by the Emperor Theodosius. Three years later, however, at a local council held at Bit-Zapat in Persia, Nestorianism was recognised as the creed of Persian Christians and, as such, received the support of the Shah. In 489

⁸⁷ C.f. A. B. Nikitin, 'Khristianstvo v Tstretral'noy Azii :drevnost' i rannem srednevekov'e', in B. A. Litvinsky (ed.), *Vostochniy Turkestan i Srednaya Aziya*, Moscow: 1984.

the Church's earlier condemnation of Nestorius was confirmed by the Byzantine Emperor Zeno and the theological school at Edessa, where Nestorians had taught, was closed. However, it transferred to Nizib in Persia and a Nestorian Patriarchate was established in Ctesiphon. From Persia Nestorian Christianity spread rapidly through eastern Persia to Central Asia and from Central Asia, along the same caravan route as Buddhism had travelled, to China where, as a recently discovered stele records, Bishop A-lo-pen in 635 was favourably received at the T'ang court and a monastery founded in the capital Chang-an three years later. As Asmussen comments:

There is every possibility that this mission, whose effect in Central Asia is documented inter alia by the Sogdian translations of biblical, martyrological and other texts, was inspired in the first instance by Rev-Ardshir. At a very early date, particularly in the time of Bishop Ma'na at the end of the 5th century, efforts may be traced to create a Christian Persian literature ... Christians experienced a prolific renaissance under the 'Abbasids, outwardly manifested by the movement of the headquarters of the church from Selucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad in 762. It was not until Timur's destructive ravaging at the end of the 14th century that Iranian Christianity was reduced to insignificant small enclaves in isolated areas.⁸⁹

One of the most notable Christians of the Nestorian Church was the Patriarch Mar Aba, a convert from Zoroastrianism, who convened a synod in 544 at which the organisation of the Nestorian church was more clearly defined and centralised. It was Mar Aba who, at the request of the Hephthalites, appointed a bishop for Christians within the Hephthalite domains.⁹⁰ Evidence of the early spread of Christianity in Bactria is provided by the statement of the fifth century Armenian author Elishe Vardapet to the effect that Christianity had spread to the land of 'K'usank' (that is the land of the Kushans) and from there south into

⁸⁸ Denis Sinor, *Inner Asia*, The Hague: Mouton, 1987, p. 225.

⁸⁹ Asmussen in *Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2), pp. 947-8.

⁹⁰ C.f. A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East*, Manchester: Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Vol.9/2, 1925.

India. In his *Christian Topography*, Cosmas Indicopleustes writes that 'Bactrians, Persians and Indians had many churches.'⁹¹ The Syrian *Book of the Laws* from the school of Badaishan, written about 200 CE, gives us some information about Kushan women Christians.

By the seventh century, on the eve of the Arab conquest, Christianity was also widespread among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. In 644 Elijah, the Metropolitan of Merv is said to have converted a large number of Turks to Christianity – 'the Turkic *kaghan* with all his army beyond the river Oxus'.⁹² In 719 several embassies from the Turkic *kaghan* went to China and from records of these embassies that survive we learn that there were many Nestorian Christians in Tokharistan. Yet Christianity had been active in southern Central Asia for some considerable time before these events. Christian missionaries went from Bactria to Sogdiana and Syrian sources from 410-415 tell of the founding of a Metropolitan see in Samarkand. The Muslim historian of Bukhara, Narshakhi, tells of the presence of Christians in Bukhara well before the Arab conquest and this has recently been confirmed by archaeological finds. Thus, for example, a potsherd bearing a fragment of a psalm in Syriac from the first half of the eighth century has been unearthed in the city of Panjikent on the outskirts of present day Samarkand, as has a Nestorian cemetery. From Sogdiana Christianity expanded into the Semirechye where again both archaeological and epigraphic evidence confirms its presence. At ak-Beshim a Christian cemetery from the sixth or seventh centuries and an eighth century church has been excavated. Christian inscriptions in both Syriac and Sogdian have been found in the Semirechye. From the epistle of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I we learn that certain Turkic peoples – probably the Karluks among whom Christianity was widespread – had converted to Christianity at the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century. When Ismail Samani seized the town of Taraz in the tenth century there was already a large Christian community there.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 305-6.

But Christianity penetrated even further east and reached the Kyrgyz peoples in the eighth or ninth centuries. A runic inscription found in Sudzhi mentions a Christian instructor to a Kyrgyz chief describing him by the Syriac term *mar* or priest. Other Kyrgyz steles with Christian runic inscriptions and decorated with Nestorian crosses have also been found. Christianity even seems to have penetrated into Eastern Turkestan as early as the fourth and fifth centuries and was probably brought there by Sogdian merchants. Certainly in the fifth and sixth centuries, according to texts found in Eastern Turkestan, Christian communities were well established in the oases cities of the Tarim basin. Many fragments of Christian texts, written in Syriac, Middle Persian, Parthian, Khotanese Saka and Sogdian have been found, including the library of a Nestorian monastery in the oasis of Turfan. Sogdian texts, however, predominate, providing evidence that Sogdian was, after Syriac, the second most important language of the Nestorian Christian Church in Central Asia.⁹³

The spread of Nestorianism encountered some opposition from the more established religions, yet it continued to gain ground and was, at the time of the Arab conquest, along with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Manichaeism, one of the major religions encountered by the Arabs in Central Asia. It continued to play a role in the life of the steppe for a further five centuries until, along with Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Buddhism, it was finally suppressed after the conversion of the descendants of Chingiz Khan in Central Asia to Islam.

We thus see that Central Asia on the eve of the Arab conquest was a mosaic of peoples, races, languages, religions and cultures and whilst it had no distinctive cultural identity of its own, its southern peoples, subject to cultural influences emanating from Sasanian Iran, India and China, expressed traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance which, in the judgement of Richard Frye, enabled them, in the wake of the Arab conquest, to give to Islam the international character which it so sorely lacked and which enabled southern Central Asia in

⁹³ C.f. Nikitin in Litvinsky (ed.) *Vostochniy Turkestan i Srednyaya Aziya*, pp. 128-130.

the ninth and tenth centuries to make a contribution to world civilisation in philosophy, science, and the spiritual life out of all proportion to its size and location. Frye wrote:

We must discard the notion that eastern Iran and Central Asia were merely provincial offshoots of Sasanian culture and civilization. Whilst not denying the overwhelming influence of a great empire, which the Sasanian was, on its neighbours, the local cultures of the east were flowering in their own rights, and the brilliant Iranian-Buddhist culture south of the Hisar mountains range in modern Tajikistan was matched by the Sogdian and Khwarazmian city-state cultures in the river valleys of the north. Trade with Russia and China had made these two centres not only rich in commerce, but also in production of textiles, handicrafts of metal, wood and other media. Furthermore the religious heterogeneity and syncretism of this area, with Christians, Buddhists, Manicheans, Zoroastrians, Jews and others rubbing elbows, contrasted with the rigid state church of the Sasanians. In other words, two conditions of cultural and intellectual development, wealth and tolerance, were more in evidence in the east than in the west. This was the varied Iranian world which the Arabs had to subdue.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ R.N. Frye, *Islamic Iran and Central Asia: 7th-12th Centuries* London: Variorum Reprints, 1979, pp. 3-4. For a similar judgement cf. B. A. Litvinsky and Zhang Guang-da in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. III, p. 33.

PART II

ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

CHAPTER 3

THE ARAB CONQUEST OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Arab conquest of Central Asia was ruthless, bloody and prolonged. Whereas the Arab victory over the Byzantine Empire was never total, with the consequence that the Arabs were left with a dangerous and disputed frontier with that empire, Arab victories in the east brought about the complete dissolution of the Sasanian empire. Yet despite the collapse of Sasanian state structures after the battle of Qadisiya in 637 CE, the Arabs inherited problems on the north east frontier of the former Persian empire where they found themselves faced with a number of small, semi-independent, and well nigh inaccessible principalities, some of which, like the principalities of Khwarazm and Sogdiana had never been wholly incorporated into the Sasanian empire. Yet the subjugation of these principalities was essential if the Arabs were to gain control of the lucrative caravan trade with China. Although the province of Khurasan was conquered in 654, the conquest of Transoxania – which the Arabs called *Mawara-al-nahr*, the land beyond the river – was to prove much more difficult and it was not until after the accession to the Caliphate of Mu'awiya that his general 'Ubaydulla ibn Ziyad crossed the Oxus (Amu Darya) and, in 674, defeated a combined force of Iranians and Turks from the oasis of Bukhara.¹ In 680 Muslim ibn Ziyad, the governor of Khurasan, raided Samarkand and again defeated a combined army of Iranians and Turks, but it was not until after the appointment of al-Hajjaj as viceroy of Iraq, and the campaigns

¹ Initially the Turks faced by the Arabs were the Türgesh; later they were the Karluks who had replaced the former Turkish kaghanate about 766 as the dominant confederacy on the steppe. They, in turn, gave way to the Uighur who dominated the steppe until they themselves were overthrown by the Kyrgyz in 840. Many Turkish peoples, however, remained outside of the Turkish khaghanates, the most notable being the Oghuz or Ghuzz who roamed east of the Caspian

of his general Qutayba ibn Muslim, that, between 712 and 713, the city states of Bukhara and Samarkand were finally brought into the Arab domain and a lucrative portion of the caravan route to China secured. This still left the Arabs with a precarious frontier with the steppe nomads and although this frontier would gradually dissolve, the steppe nomads continued to be a source of trouble for Muslim rulers until the thirteenth century when Chingiz Khan completely redrew the map of Central Asia.

Although the local landowners (*dihqans*) in *Mawara-al-nahr* looked from time to time to China for help against the Arab advance into their territory little help was forthcoming from that quarter for, despite the fact that China had, between 645 and 658, broken the power of the Western Turks, she was too pre-occupied with Tibetan attacks on her southern frontier to be able to render much assistance against the Arab advance into territory which formally, at least, she regarded as her own. When the inevitable clash between the Arabs and the Chinese did occur, at the battle of the river Talas in 751, the Chinese were roundly defeated. One consequence of this battle was that the Arabs, and through them the western Christendom, learned, from Chinese prisoners taken during this battle, the art of manufacturing rag-paper, which now began to supplant papyrus and parchment as the vehicle for the written word in the West.

The detailed history of the Arab conquest of Central Asia can be read in Sir Hamilton Gibb's classic account, *The Arab Conquest of Central Asia*.² There is, however, one important question which Gibb, writing over half a century ago, did not address, but it is one that is important for historians of religions and it is how far, if at all, was the Arab conquest of Central Asia a Muslim one? Much, of course, depends on how we understand the term 'Muslim', for if by a Muslim conquest is meant a conquest designed to spread Islam, then the conquest of Central Asia cannot be so described for the simple reason that little or no attempt

to the Syr Darya. It was they who, with the Karluks, fought the Arabs and it was they who eventually accepted Islam in the 10th century.

² H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1923.

was made to convert the subject peoples to Islam: on the contrary, the subject peoples were positively discouraged from embracing Islam for this would have led to claims from non-Arab Muslims, as it did in the next century, for the same taxation privileges as were enjoyed by the Arab Muslims – a claim that was unacceptable to the Caliphal treasury. What must be recognised is that Islam was initially thought of by the Arabs, not as a universal religion, but as a religion peculiar to themselves and one which made them the equal, if not indeed superior to the other 'Peoples of the Book' – that is to Jews and Christians – and which gave them the right to subdue the earth³ Chingiz Khan in the thirteenth century would draw a similar conclusion from his own religious ideology.⁴

The view that the motivating factor which drove the Arabs out of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century to world conquest was not Islam, but the climatic, social and economic conditions obtaining in the peninsula at that time is, not one that today finds much support.⁵ Contemporary historians are more inclined to stress the inner dynamic which comes from a vigorous ideology. Studies of the Arab conquest by J.J. Saunders and by Fred McGraw Donner, are cases in point.⁶ Thus Donner, in his monumental study, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, published in 1981, writes:

A closer look at the received interpretations of the Islamic conquests reveals ... a fundamental problem ... For we find on examination that most of them view the conquest either as the result of some deterministic historical process, such as the increasing population in Arabia, or as the result of a fortuitous combination of historical accidents, such as raids of undisciplined Arab tribesmen into the Fertile Crescent at a moment of temporary weakness in the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. In either case, these interpretations deny, in effect, that the "Arab Conquest" was

³ Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 43. So also Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, pp. 201-2.

⁴ See chapter 5 below.

⁵ This known now known as 'the Becker-Caetani thesis'. cf. C. H. Becker, 'Der Islam als Problem' (1910) reprinted in *Islamstudien I*, Leipzig: 1924 and L. Caetani, *L'Arabia preistorica e il progressivo essiccamento della terra* in *Studi di storia orientale I*, Milan: 1911.

⁶ J. J. Saunders, *A History of Medieval Islam*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.

in any organic way related to the appearance of Islam. The deterministic interpretations, by explaining the historical events as the result of inexorable forces, imply that the Islamic conquests, or something very much like them, would have occurred whether or not Islam appeared on the scene ... Western scholarship has proceeded on the basis of the unspoken assumption that the Islamic conquests could not "really" have been caused by Islam ... The idea that the conquests were the product of a definable movement having a powerful inner dynamic of its own, and traceable to a new religious ideology, was simply not deemed worthy of serious consideration.⁷

Donner's own understanding of the spectacular success of the Arab armies is that they present 'a remarkable testament to the power of human action mobilised by ideological commitment as a force in human affairs.'⁸

Unlike the Christian church, the Muslim community was a state from its very beginnings. From the moment in 620 CE when he took himself and his followers from Mecca and established the small Muslim community in Yathrib (known later simply as Medina – the City) some two hundred miles to the north of Mecca, Muhammad added the role of statesman to that of prophet and, we should must add, that of military leader as well – the only founder of a major world religion to play such a role. Islam was thus involved with political power and armed struggle from the very beginning. After his death his successors, the Caliphs, would seek to exercise similar authority, although in the course of time their powers in areas such as religious law (*shari'a*), would devolve onto a semi-professional class of persons known as the '*ulama*, or 'the learned'.

The implications of the creation of the Muslim community or *umma* had far reaching implications. To quote Donner again:

The appearance of the Islamic state in western Arabia was an event unparalleled in the history of the peninsula, and it had unparalleled consequences. It was the integrative power of the new state, acting on the raw material of Arabian society, that unleashed the

⁷ Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, pp. 7-8.

⁸ Donner, *ibid.*, p. 9.

expansive military potential of the peninsula and generated the Islamic conquest⁹

The integrative power of the new ideology, short lived though it turned out to be, was, according to Donner, derived from three important aspects of the faith of Islam: (i) the concept of a unique trans-tribal religio-political community, the '*umma*'; (ii) the concept of an absolute higher authority than that of traditional tribal mores, and (iii) the concept of the centralisation of authority within the '*umma*.'

(i) The idea of a community based on religious affiliation was not new in Arabia. What was new about the Islamic *umma* was the uncompromising monotheism which put the allegiance that men owed to Allah so far above all other allegiances, and more particularly above tribal allegiances, that new and over-riding bonds of allegiance between men and God, and between men and men, were capable of being formed. A consequence of this was that older tribal allegiances counted, in theory, for very little: in practice, however, inter-tribal warfare would continue to plague Islam throughout and, indeed, beyond the 'Umayyad Caliphate, and nowhere more so than among the Arabs in Central Asia.

The logic of the claim of the *umma* to trans-tribal allegiance under the universal imperative of the one true God implied, of course, that the *umma* could and must expand to include, ultimately, the whole of mankind, although this implication was not drawn at the time of the Arab conquests. It would be left to later generations, and particularly to the Persians, to draw out the universalist implications of Islam.

(ii) The second aspect of Islam that aided the political consolidation of the Arab Muslim community was the notion of divine law, of an absolute higher authority than the tribal law which had hitherto governed the relationships between people in Arabia. The *umma*, as the recipient of this law, revealed in the Qur'an and in the growing corpus of *ahadith*, was thus able to regulate the lives of

⁹ Donner, *ibid.*, p. 55.

its members in ways that transcended the boundaries of tribal identity and which could claim, when necessary, universal jurisdiction.

(iii) The third way in which Islam sought – not always successfully – to consolidate a sense of trans-tribal community in the new *umma* was by centralising authority. Islam's strict monotheism, in which all authority rested ultimately with God, had, in its early days, the corollary that all worldly authority rested with his representative on earth – the Prophet – and after his death with his successors the Caliphs. This centralisation of authority laid the basis for the rise of powerful state institutions within Islam the like of which had hitherto been unknown among the Arabs.

The *umma* thus expressed from its inception that fusion of politics and religion which was to become the characteristic expression of the Islamic idea. The dichotomy of *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, of church and state, so characteristic of Christian history, does not, theoretically, exist in Islam, and further dichotomies expressed in the terms spiritual and temporal, clerical and lay, religious and secular, have no equivalents in the classical languages of the Muslim peoples.¹⁰ In the Islamic world, therefore, there should, ideally, be no conflict between religion and the state, for the powers which these represent are one and the same. The early Caliphs were thus at one and the same time the heads of the state, of the community and of the faith. The institution over which they presided was at once both church and state. For this reason there is in Islam no clergy and no central religious authority to decide on the content of faith and to determine what is orthodox and what is heretical. What constitutes the faith and the practice of Islam is a matter for consensus (*ijma'*), ideally of the whole community, in practice in the history of Islam of the majority view as articulated by the *'ulama* backed up, whenever possible, by military might.

The conquests re-enforced the idea among the Arabs that they were in possession of a unique religion and were, under God, empowered, in its name, to

conquer the earth. Under the Caliphs the community at Medina was, within a century, transformed into a vast empire. In the experience of early Muslims religious truth and political power were inextricably linked, the first sanctifying the second, and the second confirming and sustaining the first. Military success was thus held to be proof of Divine favour and Islam was, therefore, in the words of Malise Ruthven, 'programmed for victory'.¹¹

But to return to the Arab conquest of Central Asia. The subjugation of Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* was largely the work of two men, the viceroy of Iraq, Hajjaj, and his general Qutayba ibn Muslim. The achievements of the latter in extending the Arab empire into Central Asia were considerable and it is not surprising that his name was later added to the role of martyrs for Islam in Central Asia, and that his tomb in the Ferghana has remained a place of pilgrimage for Muslims to this day. Gibb summed up the situation at the time of Qutayba's death in 714 as follows:

It was Qutayba, with Hajjaj at his back, who had held his conquests together, and when he disappeared there was neither leader nor organisation to take his place. The history of the next decade shows how loose and unstable was the authority of the Arabs. It was force which made the conquests, and only force or conciliation which could hold them.¹²

The former, however, was lacking, and conciliation did not go far enough to satisfy the *dihqans* now led by Gurak, the ruler of Sogdiana. For a quarter of a century after Qutayba's death the Arabs made no further advances into Central Asia and would maintain only a very precarious hold on what they had so far gained. Further, the Turkic factor was now coming into play as some of the Sogdian *dihqans* made overtures to the nomadic Türgesh to help them throw off

¹⁰So Bernard Lewis, *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, Oxford: OUP, 1974, Vol. I, p. xvi.

¹¹Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000, p.284. This, of course, is not the view of the Shi'a who have progressively developed a conception of the necessary suffering of the righteous and are, on that count, the better able to deal with the lack of overt success in the world.

¹²Gibb, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

the Arab yoke. In 721, Omar bin Hubayra, the new viceroy of Iraq, who was not slow to appreciate the threat to Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* resulting from the alliance of the *dihqans* and the Türgesh, recalled the last of a series of weak governors and appointed Sa'id bin Amr al-Hashari as the new governor of this important region. In 722 al-Hashari began the re-conquest of Sogdiana and whilst he was, on the whole, successful, the Arab army in the east was handicapped by mutinies and tribal squabbles. What, however, was more worrying to the Umayyad Caliphate was the growing tendency on the part of the more settled Arabs to make common cause with the local *dihqans*, many of whom had, by the second quarter of the eighth century, become Muslims, against a policy still driven from the centre in Damascus. Such non-Arab Muslims were known as *mawali* (clients), from the tendency for such local leaders as became Muslim to ally themselves as clients of one or other of the local Arab tribal powers. Not for nothing did ibn Hubayra, the viceroy of Iraq, on appointing Muslim bin Sa'id al-Kilabi governor of Khurasan in 722 advise him to appoint a chamberlain who could 'make peace with the *mawali*.'¹³

The division between the conquered and their conquerors was not simply one of religion. The line of division was drawn by the second Caliph, 'Umar (634-44), who decreed that Arabs were not to take upon themselves any of the labours, nor any of the professions of the people of the subjugated areas, but were to hold themselves aloof from their subjects and reside in military garrisons such as those created at Basra, Kufa, and, in 670, at Merv. 'Umar also sought to keep the way of life of the conquered peoples intact. This meant that as well as not interfering in the religious affairs of the conquered peoples, the Arabs also sought to preserve, as far as possible, the existing social and administrative order. The consequence of this policy was that the old elite were quickly incorporated into the new dispensation.

¹³ Gibb, *op.cit.*, p. 64.

Yet this situation did not last. As the Arabs, unlike the Turks with whose period raids and withdrawal into and from their territory the inhabitants of the oases Transoxania were familiar, consolidated the conquest, and as Arab families began to be re-settled in the conquered regions, more and more areas of administration, previously under local control, was taken into Arab hands. A landmark in Arab settlement of Central Asia was when, sometime in the 670s, the governor of Khurasan, Ziyad bin Abihi, having centralised his administration on Merv, settled 50,000 Arab families in the region. It is from this settlement that Amoretti traces the beginning of that symbiosis between Islam and traditional Iranian culture which gave birth to 'the Abu Muslim' faction which was to play such a decisive role in the overthrow of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750 CE.¹⁴

The fraught religious situation in Iran was also fertile ground for rebellion for, as so often in the history of religions, a distinction must be drawn between the official state religion – in this instance the Zoroastrian church which was closely allied to the Sasanian monarchy – and the religion of the ordinary Iranian people which found expression in movements such as Manichaeism and Mazdakism. Many ordinary people in Iran had been alienated from the rigid ecclesiastical structures which the Sasanian monarchy had put in place in their reform of Zoroastrianism in the third century CE. In particular artisans and craftsmen who could not help, by the very nature of their occupations, but come into conflict with the taboos against being polluted by fire, earth and water promulgated by official Zoroastrian religion.¹⁵ These now made common cause with disaffected Arabs against the Arabo-Persian establishment.

But there was a further factor involved. Under the rigidly Arab Umayyad dynasty, non-Arab converts to Islam, the *mawali*, were considered inferior to Arab Muslims and this became a matter for growing resentment among the *mawali* who were all too ready to make common cause with disaffected Arabs

¹⁴ B. S. Amoretti, 'Sects and Heresies' in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol.4.*, 1975, pp. 485-486.

¹⁵ Abd al-Hussain Zarrinkub, 'The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath' in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol.4.*, 1975, p.30.

against the Umayyads and their governors. It was against this background that Abu Muslim, the emissary of the 'Abbasid leader Muhammad ibn 'Ali, unfurled the black banner of revolt in Khurasan in the early summer of 747, an event which led in 750 to the overthrow of the Umayyad Caliphate. Central Asia was beginning to play an increasingly significant part in Islamic affairs.

This is not the place to recount the intricate story of the overthrow of the Umayyad Caliphate: all that needs to be said is that the anti Umayyad movement began as a Shi'a attempt to restore the authority of the family of Muhammad in the governance of Islam. This began by their supporting the claims of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, a son of Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali by a wife from the Banu Hanifa clan, and later those of his son 'Abd-Allah ibn Muhammad, also known as Abu Hashim, held by many of his followers to be the Madhi, the promised Muslim Messiah. As the movement grew it attracted support from many different sections of Muslim society, particularly in Khurasan, where there were many, as has been mentioned, who had good reason to seek the overthrow of the Umayyads. Having established an underground network, Abu Hashim died in 716-17, leaving a number of Shi'a sects and a number of descendants of the house of Muhammad to claim that they had been designated his successors. One of these, Muhammad ibn 'Ali, whose ancestry went back, not to the Prophet's son-in-law, 'Ali, but to Muhammad's uncle 'Abbas, managed to win majority support and thus there came into being what became known as 'the 'Abbasid cause', although 'Abbasid propagandists were careful to keep secret the name of the protagonist whom they hoped to install as Caliph. In this way they were able to attract a number of different Shi'a sects to their cause. For a variety of reasons the Abbasids made Khurasan the base for the operations, not least because it was some distance away from the watchful eyes of Umayyad officials in Iraq.

The essence of 'Abbasid propaganda was that the Umayyads had abandoned Islam and that only by supporting the restoration of the Prophet's family could a reign of justice in a world woefully filled with oppression be

established. It was the hope of the saviour promised in the Qur'an, the Mahdi, that had led a number of Arabs and Iranian *mawali* to gather around the person of Harith ibn Suraij, who had appeared in Khurasan claiming to be the Madhi sometime immediately prior to 745. Suraij was killed in 745, but both the eschatological hope of a promised saviour and the 'Abbasid cause continued to gain ground in the Muslim east to the point where the new 'Abbasid Imam, Imam Ibrahim, who was himself resident at Humaima in Syria, made Khurasan the basis for his projected revolt. Among the Imam's agents in Khurasan was a young *maula*, Abu Muslim, a man about whom little is known, but who appears to have been of Iranian origin. Abu Muslim went to Khurasan in 745 initially to conduct clandestine propaganda, but later to organise open rebellion. This he did during Ramadan in 747 when he and his associates donned black clothes (as a sign of mourning for those of the Prophet's family slain by the Umayyads at the infamous battle of Karbala) and raised the black banner of the Prophet in the village of Safidhanj near Merv. The revolt was successful, but the Caliph who was eventually installed was not Imam Ibrahim, who had fallen foul of Abu Muslim and been put to death, but his brother 'Abdu'l-Abbas 'Abd-Allah. The enigmatic figure of Abu Muslim was one that would continue to inspire revolt in the east well after his own death which came at the hands of the second 'Abbasid Caliph, Mansur, in 755.

The figure of Abu Muslim is symptomatic of the eclectic nature of Islam in the lands of the Eastern Caliphate in the eighth century. Whether in his religious propaganda he amalgamated, as Barthold and Rosen maintained, the doctrines of Islam with the Buddhist belief in re-incarnation, maintaining that he was the incarnation of the same God who had also been incarnate in Muhammad, 'Ali and his descendants¹⁶, as many of his followers, and many after his death who looked for his return, believed, cannot now be ascertained. However, the prevalence of the beliefs referred to by Barthold and Rosen, both during and after the life of Abu Muslim, tell us much about popular religiosity in Khurasan in the

eighth century. Such beliefs would manifest themselves again during the revolt of al-Muqanna'. It would be some time, and certainly not until well after the Mongol conquest, that more orthodox forms of Islam would become the norm among the masses in Central Asia and even then 'primal forms' of Central Asian religion would re-assert themselves in popular Islam, and more particularly in popular Sufism, where they have continued to colour the outlook and practice of Muslims in Central Asia to the present day.

With the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate and the moving of the capital east to Baghdad, Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* began to assume a much greater role in Islamic affairs than hitherto and it is not, perhaps, too much to claim that it was in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* that, in the tenth century, Islam was transformed from being the religion of Bedouin Arabs into the religion that we know today. As R. N. Frye has written:

Bukhara, at the end of the ninth and in the tenth century, became the capital of the eastern Iranian cultural area, and thereby became the heir of a centuries-old tradition, independent of western Iran. At the same time Bukhara became the symbol of the new order -- an Islamic Iran which had amalgamated the past with the religion and civilization brought by the prophet Muhammad. This development, called the New Persian Renaissance by some scholars, spread all over the Iran Plateau and beyond. By some it has been decried as the reaction of Iranian "nationalism" against Arab Islam. I believe it was rather a successful attempt to save Islam, to release it from its Arab background and Bedouin mores, by making of Islam a far richer, more adaptable, and universal culture than it had been previously. The Samanids showed the way to reconcile ancient traditions with Islam, a path followed by other peoples later in the far-flung corners of the Islamic world.¹⁷

Yet before the emergence of the Samanids towards the end of the ninth century Khurasan, under the early Abbasids, was, as it had been in the period

¹⁶ So Barthold in his article on 'Abu Muslim' in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

¹⁷ R. N. Frye, *The Histories of Nishapur*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Oriental Series, No. 45, 1965, p. vii.

immediately preceding the overthrow of the Umayyads, in an almost permanent state of turbulence and revolt.

The most serious revolt was that associated with Hashim bin Hakim, nicknamed al-Muqanna' ('the veiled one'), which lasted from about 776 to 783. Hakim, a non-Muslim, attracted to his cause a motley collection of disaffected inhabitants of Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr*. Although he claimed prophetic status his teaching, in so far as we can reconstruct it, would seem to have been a refurbished version of Mazdakism containing little beyond the re-iteration of Mazdakism's demand for social justice for the disinherited and the alienated of the Muslim empire in the East. It was also an anti-Islamic movement bringing together all those in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* who were discontented with the new Abbasid administration and who sought for a return to pre-Islamic ways. The rejection of al-Muqanna's ideas by most of the urban population of Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* shows that it was essentially a peasant revolt among whom old beliefs persisted long after the ruling classes had come to terms with the religion of their conquerors. The rebellion associated with al-Muqanna' marked, as a leading historian of this period has said, 'a clear divide between two periods in the history of Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr*' for 'its defeat signified the definitive triumph of Islam.'¹⁸

Many changes had been taking place in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* during the period between the revolt of Abu Muslim and the defeat of the rebellion by al-Muqanna'. The local chiefs -- the *dihqans* -- had lost much of their power and most had become little more than minor land-owning subjects of the new Muslim military administrators. Arabic was now widely used, although the New Persian language (written in Arabic script) which was beginning to be adopted in Iran, was also used in Khurasan and *Mawara-an-nahr* and would, as we shall see in the next chapter, flourish at the Samanid court in Bukhara in the

¹⁸ O. G. Bolshalov in M. S. Asimov and C. E. Bosworth (eds.) *History of Civilizations in Central Asia*, Vol. IV, Paris UNESCO 1998-2000, part 1 *The Age of Achievement: A. D. 750-the end of the fifteenth century*, p. 37.

ninth and tenth centuries. Islam was, in fact, about to enter its Golden Age in Central Asia.

CHAPTER 4

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

It was in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* that, from about the middle of the ninth to the beginning of the eleventh century, Islamic civilization came to one of its finest flowerings. A glance at the lists of the leading persons in almost all branches of learning and the arts during this period shows that a quite disproportionate number of *'ulama* (scholars) and *'udaba* (literary figures) came from this region, with a *nisba* (indicative of place of origin) such as Bukhari, Marvazi, Nishapuri far outnumbering Isfahanis, Yazdis or Shirazis. Why this should be so is difficult to explain, but one reason that has been suggested is that it was the result of the pluralistic and on the whole tolerant pre-Islamic culture of the region continuing into the early Islamic period.

The culture of eastern Iran and of the principalities of the southern oases was, as we saw in chapter two, more than a provincial offshoot of Sasanian culture. It had its own distinctive ethos which allowed it, when the time came, to make a distinctive and creative contribution to the development of Islam. Iran itself had, throughout its history, been divided into two distinct cultural zones separated, east from west, by the two deserts of Dast-e Kavir and Dast-e Lut which extend from the Caspian gates near Semnan in the north to Baluchistan in the south. This physical division had the effect of re-enforcing the distinctiveness of the culture on the eastern side of this division by making it more a part of the Central Asian cultural world than of western Iran, a distinctiveness which was further enhanced by the fact that throughout the period we are now considering this region was very much on the geographical periphery of the Islamic world.

When the Arabs conquered Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* they conquered a region where, as we have seen, religious pluralism and religious tolerance were well established and where, for a considerable period of time after the Arab conquest, Islam remained a minority religion, Muslims being greatly outnumbered by Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Christians and Jews, many of whom held high positions in the administrative structure of the principalities of Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr*.¹ Yet conversion to Islam, despite official discouragement, did take place, although whether this was based on conviction is open to debate, for, as the Arab conquest became an established and irreversible fact, conversion became a clear way of gaining (or maintaining) social status and economic position. However, acculturation to Islam was not without problems, as the numerous sectarian, schismatic and syncretistic movements which came into being, perhaps in greater numbers in this region than in any other part of the Islamic world, testify. Neither did acculturation always progress smoothly, and violent protests were not uncommon as Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Buddhists and Nestorian Christians resisted Muslim attempts to convert or displace them from cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand. Yet by the ninth century *Mawara-al-nahr* was regarded as Muslim territory and the Hanafi school of law was well established there. Its most famous scholar, the learned Abu-Hafs of Bukhara, who died in 832, was widely regarded, as the inscription on his tomb testifies, as 'the teacher of the scholars in *Mawara-al-nahr*.'

¹ It has been estimated, for example, that by 750 CE, only 8% of the population of the city of Nishapur were Muslim. Not until early in the ninth century did the figure reach 50%. By the end of the ninth century, however, the figure was 80% (Frye, *The Histories of Nishapur*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard Oriental Series No 45, 1965a, p. 40). If this were the case in a large and important metropolis like Nishapur, we can assume that the figure for Muslims in the smaller towns and in the rural areas was much lower. Indeed, we know that Zoroastrian seminaries and fire temples continued to function in towns such as Musalla and Karkuy in Sistan, Bayhaq in Khurassan, and Vraksha just west of Bukhara, well into the eleventh century. Although in Nishapur itself Muslim tradition records that, in 993, 5,000 Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews accepted Islam, we know from other sources that Zoroastrianism, at least, continued to be active in *Mawara-al-nahr* late into the thirteenth century (Cf. Jamsheed Choksy, 'Conflict, Coexistence, and Cooperation: Muslims and Zoroastrians in Eastern Iran During the Medieval Period' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 80, 1990, pp. 213-33).

Initially the Arabic language had rather more success in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr* than did Arab religion. The adoption of Arabic, and even the adoption of Islamic culture as an orientation, did not necessarily imply conversion to Islam as a religion and many Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians continued to serve the Arabs, as Christians and Jews had served the Sasanians before them, without converting to their faith. Once the Arabs had consolidated their rule in Khurasan and *Mawara-al-nahr*, the Persian language was banished from public use for almost three hundred years, which meant that any Persians who wanted to contribute to intellectual and literary life had to use Arabic. The number doing so was extraordinarily large, so much so that, as Spuler has noted, 'the so-called "Arabic literature" of the time was largely the work of Persians'.² Foremost among such Persians were the Arabic grammarian, Sibawayh (d.800), the historian, and commentator on the Qur'an, al-Tabari (839-923), and the philosopher al-Farabi (870-950), who, although he was almost certainly Turkish by birth, was very much Persian by culture.

Yet the necessity to use Arabic was an advantage, for as Hamilton Gibb pointed out, 'the fundamental and decisive contribution of the Arabs to their empire was an intellectual one' and this nowhere more so than in Central Asia.³ This is not to deny that the Arab empire was the result of military conquest, nor that much of the material and intellectual culture of that empire was built on the foundations of pre-Islamic cultures: it is to recognise that even when the Arabs conquered lands, even lands where there was a strong cultural and intellectual tradition, the indigenous languages of these lands eventually gave way to Arabic as the language, not only of the administration, but of theology, philosophy and science as well. This, according to Gibb, was because those in the indigenous cultures competent to judge recognised the potential within Arabic for developing and refining the conceptual tools necessary for the study of these disciplines.

² B. Spuler, 'The Disintegration of the Caliphate of the East' in *Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. IA., 1970, p.145.

³ H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1949, p.1.

Yet, along with the Arab language, Islam did gain ground in Central Asia. Although Zoroastrianism underwent a brief renaissance in the tenth century, its future became more precarious when it became apparent to the old Persian aristocracy that 'Iranism' could be better pursued within Islam than outside it. The course of Islam in Central Asia was also helped by the fact that, after the 'Abbasid revolution, the acceptance of Islam no longer signified the acceptance of a foreign yoke. Yet the Islam which we glimpse in the Samanid and Ghaznavid courts of southern Central Asia in the ninth and tenth centuries was significantly different from that found in other parts of the Islamic world, not least because it showed itself capable of accommodating many of the values of the pre-Islamic religious cultures of this culturally diverse region.

Thus the 'Abbasid revolution not only had the effect of shifting the centre of gravity of the Islamic Empire eastwards, it also marked the end of Arab hegemony over Islam and, in the east, the beginning of the cultural ascendancy of Persia. It also marked the beginning of what R.N. Frye called 'the internationalisation of Islam' by releasing it from its Arab background and by making it, thereby, a richer, more adaptable and more universal faith than it had been hitherto.⁴ As Frye wrote: 'The Samanids showed the way to reconcile ancient traditions with Islam, a path followed by other peoples later elsewhere in the Islamic world.'⁵

By the middle of the tenth century the 'Abbasid Caliphate was in a state of near disintegration, brought on by internal corruption, court intrigue, and theological factionalism. It had also become increasingly dependent for its day to day survival on an imperial guard of imported Turkish slaves. During the tenth century effective power in the Islamic heartland passed to a rebellious group of Shi'ite adventurers known as the Buyids (Arabic, Buwayhids) who came from the area of Daylam to the south-west of the Caspian Sea. In 945 they occupied

⁴ R. N. Frye, *Islamic Iran and Central Asia (7th -12th Centuries)*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1979, IX,1-6.

⁵ Frye, *Ibid.*, XXIII, p. 69.

Baghdad, installed a new Caliph, al-Muti' and took over the secular government of the country. As the power exercised from the centre waned, a number of provinces of the empire – in North Africa, Egypt, Persia and Central Asia – began to assume greater and greater degrees of *de facto* independence from such authority as the Caliphate in Baghdad still possessed. In Central Asia a number of powerful families fought for supremacy in the region. As early as 820, i.e. less than a century after the Abbasid dynasty came to power, the Caliph, al-Ma'mun, had seen his general Tahir set up a virtually autonomous dynasty in Khurasan, and the Saffarids establish another near autonomous realm in the province of Seistan. The Saffarids eventually broke the power of the Tahirids, but found themselves in turn ousted from power by the Samanids.

The Samanids came originally from the region around Balkh, the capital in pre-Muslim times of the ancient Greek kingdom of Bactria and famous as a centre of both Buddhist and Zoroastrian learning. The founder of the Samanid dynasty was a descendent of a Zoroastrian priestly family who, so his family were later to maintain, had accepted Islam from Asad bin 'Abd-Allah al-Qasri who was the governor of Khurasan from 723-727. His sons, in 819, were rewarded for their loyalty to the Caliph, al-Ma'mun, by being made governors respectively of Samarkand, Herat, Ferghana and Shash (Tashkent). In 873 the great-grandson of the Saman-Khudat who had founded the family's fortunes, Isma'il Samani, finally defeated the Tahirids and established himself in Bukhara, adding, after the death of his brother nineteen years later, the principality of Samarkand to his widening domain. At its height in the tenth century the Samanid realm included Khurasan, large parts of southern *Mawara-al-nahr* and a large part of what today is northern Afghanistan. Thus began the great age of the Samanids in southern Central Asia, the last indigenous Iranian dynasty to rule over that region. The dynasty would last for little over a century, but the glamour of the its court became the stuff of legend in Central Asia, and, indeed, throughout the Islamic world. The austere, burnt brick Samanid mausoleum, miraculously preserved from marauding hands

by being buried in the sands until the present century, stands in Bukhara to this day as a memorial to this golden age of Islam in Central Asia.

Any hopes that the 'Abbasids might have entertained that the Samanids and the Saffarids would destroy each other vanished when Isma'il Samani broke the power of the Saffarids at a battle near Balkh in 900 CE and sent their leader to be executed in Baghdad. The Samanids, in fact, continued to the end of their dynasty to regard themselves, at least formally, as clients of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, although there is no record of their ever having sent even the minimal tribute to the 'Abbasid treasury in Baghdad.

The intellectual and artistic policy for which the Samanids are celebrated was no mere ornament to their court, but an integral part of their claim to legitimacy, for it consciously expressed the (not always Islamic) values of the landowners and administrators who provided the economic and civil base of their power. Whilst Arabic continued to be used in the administration, and in theology and law and whilst, despite an attempt to supplant it by Persian, it remained the language of the court, Persian now began to make itself felt as a parallel medium for both verse and prose expression. Banished as a literary language for almost three hundred years, Persian, now revived and, now written in Arabic characters and known as 'New Persian', became, under the influence of a national literary revival known as the *shu'ubiyya*, the language of such renowned poets as Rudaki (d.940), Daqiqi (c.935-80) and, supremely, at the end of Samanid rule, of Firdawsi (d.1020), who took up and brought to completion the epic history of the Persians known as the *Shah-nameh* (The Book of Kings). This work, which Firdawsi went on revising until 1010, gives expression to what it is to be Persian by bringing together and uniting different strands of local tradition which helped to form a common consciousness and sense of identity among the Persians. What it showed the Persians was their place and function in world history.

The *Shah-nameh* begins with the creation of the world. The Persians represent the forces of light and good in the world who have to fight against the

forces of darkness and evil represented by the barbarian Turkish invaders from the steppes of Central Asia (Turan). Whilst this view of history reflected the theological dualism which was at the heart of the religion of Zoroastrianism, it was formulated in a way calculated to accord with Islamic teaching and represented the way in which the Persians compensated for their sense of inferiority vis-à-vis their Arab conquerors by articulating a distinctive vocation for themselves within the Islamic world. Yet the epic also reflected pre-Islamic Persian values and ideals and whilst there is no reason to doubt Firdawsi's commitment to Islam, what he did in the *Shah-nameh* was to assert the existence of values other than narrowly Islamic ones – the values, in fact, of the cultivated aristocracy who were his patrons, and whilst these values were not incompatible with Islam, Islam was certainly not its inspiration.

However, the great contribution of Persia to Islam at this time was to the development of philosophy. As the contemporary émigré Iranian philosopher, Seyyed Hossain Nasr, has stated: 'the Persians played a central role in the elaboration of Islamic philosophy from the very beginning'⁶ and it was in Khurasan and Central Asia that that contribution was most fully elaborated. This was due, in part, to the pluralist nature of the culture of Central Asia and to the fact that Christian and Zoroastrian scholars had made the Persians familiar with both Greek and (to a lesser extent) Indian philosophical ideas.⁷ Philosophy had also become necessary in Islam for, as G. E. von Grunebaum has pointed out, it was needed to discipline the uncontrolled growth of sectarianism and to protect Islam from rival faiths.⁸ Philosophy in Islam, as S.A.M. Adshead has written, was 'an affair of the frontier: Central Asia in one direction, Spain in another, for on these frontiers Islam had to argue'.⁹ In this enterprise the outstanding Central

⁶ Seyed Hussain Nasr, 'Sufism' in *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 4, 1975, p. 419

⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Majesty that was Islam: The Islamic World 661-1100*, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson 1974), pp. 134-135.

⁸ G. E. von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: 650-1258*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970, pp. 91-95

⁹ S. A. M. Adshead, *Central Asia in World History*, London: Macmillan, 1993, p.47.

Asian figures were al-Farabi (c.870-950), al-Razi (864-925) and ibn Sina (980-1037).

Al-Farabi, who was of Turkish extraction, was born in Khurasan and spent the first half of his life there – an indication of the role that Khurasan was beginning, even at the end of the ninth century, to play in the intellectual life of Islam. After leaving Khurasan he went to Baghdad where he studied philosophy and Greek science, mainly with Christian teachers. Nothing is known about how he learnt his living, although he died in Aleppo in 950 whilst in the entourage of the Arab Hamdani Prince Sayf-al-dawla who was a noted patron of men of letters.

Much attention has of late been paid to the work of al-Farabi and it is he, rather than al-Kindi, who is today regarded by many as the real founder of Islamic philosophy, or at least of Islamic studies in logic and metaphysics. Championing the underlying harmony which he saw between Plato and Aristotle, al-Farabi saw the Qur'an, rather as the German philosophers, Kant and Hegel, saw the Christian scriptures, as but a symbolical expression of truths known more directly by the light of reason. All religions, for al-Farabi, were imaginative projections which translated into symbols the ideas that the prepared intellect could assimilate apart from revelation. It was a conception of the task of philosophy that he was to pass on to both al-Razi and to the greatest of all Islamic philosophers, ibn Sina.

Al-Razi lived and died in Rayy (864-925), and is best remembered for the position which he took in the debate over faith and reason, opposing, as he did, the 'prophetic philosophy', as he called it, so characteristic of Islam. Like al-Farabi and ibn Sina, al-Razi believed, as had the Stoics before him, that the Creator had placed in human beings a spark of his own intellect (*al-'aql*) and that there was, therefore, no need for revealed religion and consequently no need for prophets to declare this: men and women were quite capable of discovering truth for themselves.

Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) was born in Bukhara in 980, lived part of his life in Khiva, and finally, like Firdawsi, had to flee from the

overbearing patronage of Mahmud of Ghazna, who in 999 had conquered the Samanid domains, to western Persia, where he died in Hamadan in 1037. His place in the history of Islamic philosophy has been aptly summarised by Lenn E. Goodman as being:

the author ... of the philosophic synthesis that al-Kindi and al-Razi never quite achieved, that al-Farabi laid the foundations for, that al-Ghazzali criticised, that ibn Ti'fayl and Ibn Rushd tried to defend or qualify or re-define to meet al-Ghazzali's attack, and that Ibn Khaldun, like so many of his contemporaries who were lesser thinkers than he, quietly used but were often embarrassed to name, as the attitude of openness that al-Kindi had advocated waned in Islamic letters ...¹⁰

However, the faith in the supremacy of reason that had characterised the philosophical outlook of al-Farabi, al-Razi and ibn Sina was roundly criticised by another great Central Asian philosopher al-Biruni (973-1051). Where al-Biruni, who was of Iranian extraction, was born is not known. All that can be said with certainty is that he came from Khwarazm and spent most of his life, first at the court of the Samanids and then, after their fall, at the court of Mahmud of Ghazna whom he accompanied on his expeditions into northern India. He died sometime after 1050 CE.

Al-Biruni was a prolific scholar who wrote on chronology, mineralogy, pharmacology, astronomy, mathematics, ancient history and the comparative study of religions. Indeed, he can, with justice, be regarded as one of the very first historians of religions giving in his *Tahqiq ma li'l-hind* (Enquiry into what is to be found in India), written around 1030 CE, the first full account of the religions of India.¹¹ This work is remarkably free from polemical concerns and only rarely does al-Biruni pass judgement on the beliefs and practices that he describes, being content, for the most part, to simply recount, often in considerable detail, the religious, philosophical and scientific beliefs of the Hindus with whom he met.

¹⁰ Len Goodman, *Avicenna*, London: Routledge, 1992 pp. viii-ix.

¹¹ Cf. A. Jeffery, 'Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religion' in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume*, Calcutta Iran Society, 1951, pp. 125-160.

For historians of religions wanting knowledge about the state of religion and philosophy in India in the eleventh century he is an invaluable source of reference: unfortunately, despite its having been available in a good English translation for over a century, his book on Indian religions and philosophy is not widely known in Western scholarship.¹²

The truly outstanding contribution of this southern Central Asian cultural world to the growth of Islam, however, was not to Islamic philosophy, but to Sufism. The origins of Sufism are obscure, as is the origin of the term itself, and whilst it would be going too far to claim that Sufism originated in Khurasan, the influence of Central Asia, and of the religions found there – particularly of Buddhism – on the development and elaboration of Sufism is incontestable.

The founder of the important Khurasani school of Sufism was Ibrahim ibn Adam who was born in Balkh about 718 and died somewhere on the Muslim border with Byzantium about 782. Prior to the Arab conquest, Balkh had been a major Buddhist centre, and the story of ibn Adam's conversion to the Sufi way of life echoes that of the conversion of Buddha to the ascetic life. It is worth recalling: He wrote:

My father was one of the princes of Khurasan, and I was a youth, and rode to the chase. I went out one day on a horse of mine, with my dog alone, and raised a hare or a fox. While I was chasing it, I heard a voice of an unseen speaker say, "Oh Ibrahim, for this was thou created? Is it this thou wast commanded to do?" I felt dread, and stopped -- then I began again, and urged my horse on. Then I heard the voice -- from the horn of my saddle, by God! -- saying, "It was not for this thou wast created! It was not this thou wast commanded to perform!" I dismounted then, and came across one of my fathers shepherds, and took from him his woollen tunic and put it on. I gave him my mare and all I had with me in exchange, and turned my steps toward Mecca.¹³

¹² Cf. Edward Sachau translation *Alberuni's India*, London: Trübner and Co., 1888.

¹³ John A. Williams (ed.), *Islam*, London: Prentice Hall International, 1961, p. 140.

Having wandered as far as Syria it is recorded that he encountered a number of Christian monks and, in particular, a monk called Simeon who was the occasion, so the record tells us, of his achieving full 'gnosis' – the search for which was later to become a characteristic feature of Khurasani Sufism – another example of the influence of a non-Islamic religion on Islam. The main characteristic of the *dhikr* (remembrance of God) developed by ibn Adam was silent remembrance. As his pupil Abu Nu'aim recorded him as saying: 'The beginning of service is meditation and silence, save for the invocation and recollection of God.'¹⁴ The silent *dhikr* would become a feature of the Sufi order which Naqshband would found in Bukhara in the 13th century and which would spread throughout the Islamic world. Its adherents are still to be found in Central Asia today.

The most famous of ibn Adam's pupils was Shaiq al-Balkhi (d.810) who not only emphasised the importance of complete reliance on God, but defined this as a spiritual state (*hal*) which all Sufis should strive to attain. He also sought to systematise Sufi doctrine – something that would remain a feature of Central Asian Sufism in the centuries which followed.

But the contribution of Central Asia to the developing intellectual and religious life of Islam was not confined to philosophy and mysticism. In the elaboration of law (*shari'a*) the contribution of at least two Central Asian scholars, al-Bukhari (d.870) and al-Maturidi (d.941) was crucial.

After the Qur'an, which contains very little actual legislation, the other great source of law in Islam is the *sunna* or practice of the Prophet and his Companions and which is believed by Muslims to have been preserved in the *ahadith* (traditions) of their sayings and doings. As the religious and secular authority of the Caliphate waned in the ninth century, religious authority was increasingly invested in the ulama, who regarded themselves as the only competent and legitimate representatives of the consensus (*ijma'*) of the Muslim *umma*. Rival factions within the ulama had increasingly to re-invent the prophetic

¹⁴ Arthur Arberry, *Sufism*, London: Mandala Books, 1979, p. 37.

sunna (and create new *ahadith* on which it was based) to support their various positions. By the ninth century *ahadith* had swollen to such an extent that it had become unmanageable and could be saved only by a critical sifting of 'authentic' *hadith* from ones that were spurious. One of the major figures in the task of establishing a sound (*sahih*) canonical collection of *ahadith* was Ishma'il al-Bukhari, a Bukharan who, when he was not wandering the Islamic world searching for and testing the validity of *ahadith*, spent his teaching career in Nishapur, returning to his native Bukhara to die there in 870 CE.

In the latter part of the second Islamic century there developed among many Muslim thinkers under the influence, initially, of the Neo-Platonism of Eastern Christian thinkers, and then as a consequence of the direct translation into Arabic of works of Greek philosophy, and in particular of the works of Aristotle, a rationalising spirit which sought to systematise Islamic doctrine. These thinkers called themselves *ahl al-'adl wa al-tawhid*, the People of the Divine Justice and Unity. This name derives from two of their most characteristic arguments -- that Divine justice necessitated that men and women had free will and moral choice, and that the Qur'an, must be regarded as created, in that to regard it as un-created would compromise the essential unity (*tawhid*) of God. The conservative *'ulama*, led by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, rejected both of these arguments and regarded the methodology of the Mu'tazila (the withdrawers), as they were dubbed, as a blasphemous attempt to make God conform to the irrelevant ideas of his creatures. Despite the fact that, after being in favour for a time at the Caliphal court in Baghdad, the Caliph al-Mutawakkil in 850 CE decreed the death penalty for those who taught that the Qur'an was the created Word of God, mu'tazilite rationalism remained attractive, particularly in Central Asia, so much so that there arose in Samarkand a group which felt that it had still to defend what in the rest of the Islamic world had become the orthodox position. The known thinker of this school was al-Maturidi (d. 944), the 'second father of Sunni theology' (*kalam*) as he has been called, and who, quite independently of the very similar position

which was being established by al-Ash'ari in Baghdad, sought to defend orthodoxy by utilising the same rational methods that the Mu'tazila used to oppose it. Maturidi's school represented the theological arm of the Hanafi school of law which had established itself in Central Asia in the previous century and which is still the dominant law school in Central Asia today. However, in contrast to al-Ash'ari, Maturidi conceded that men and women do, in fact, have free-will, and that this gives a moral basis for the rewards and punishments in the afterlife of which the Qur'an speaks. He also maintained that the nature of ethics was such that God was bound by the absolutes of the ethic which he had himself created, although unlike al-Ash'ari, he makes no attempt to reconcile this humanistic ethic with the doctrine of predestination found in the Qur'an and which was maintained by the rigidly orthodox *ulama* of Baghdad.

What emerges from a study of the golden age of Islam in Central Asia is a picture of a rich and varied religious and cultural life and although it might seem too strong a term, it is a not entirely inappropriate one. Old traditions and beliefs survive and are gradually assimilated into Islam and despite periodic persecution, as for example during the time of Caliph al-Madhi (775-785) who instituted a vigorous policy designed to root out the *zindiqs* (infidels), Christians, Jews, Manicheans and Zoroastrians, continued to survive and to contribute to the rich diversity of Islam in Central Asia. The real problem, however, was sectarianism which, when allied to, or expressive of, political and social protest, raised time and again the banner of bloody revolt and was itself, time and again, ruthlessly suppressed. These were turbulent times, but they were also times in which the creative impulse found expression, in philosophy, in science, in law and in spirituality as never before or since in Central Asia.

the text which he wrote for the catalogue of an exhibition of Bukharan Jewish artefacts in St. Petersburg in 1992 and in New York in 1999: 'Two thousand years of Jewish History in Central Asia ... seems to be drawing to a close.'⁶

⁶ Dymshits, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

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