



Geographies of transimperial religion: the transformation of religious space in a world of empires

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of ‘transimperial’ history to show how religious transformations within then between different empires led to the development of new religious geographies and the alteration of existing religious centres. Combining examples from Asian, African, European and American empires, the article points to common patterns across four categories of religious space: steam ports (such as Bombay), railway towns (such as Harbin), preexisting pilgrimage places (such as Bodhgaya), and imperial borderlands (such as Hawaii). These transimperial sites spaces enabled doctrinal, ritual, linguistic, and organizational changes to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, enabling the propagation of such new religions as Theosophy and Baha’ism. Further attention is paid to architectural and organizational change, as well as the use of printing and translation in promoting new versions of these religions to different population groups. In this way, transimperial transformation paved the way for more familiar globalized forms of religiosity in the later 20th century.

KEYWORDS

Islam; Christianity;
Buddhism; Baha’ism;
theosophy; ports;
borderlands; technology

Introduction

In recent decades, researchers have generated a vast scholarly literature on religion and empire, alongside a similarly voluminous corpus examining religion and globalization. By adopting the rubric of ‘transimperial’ history, this article seeks to move beyond this bifurcation by showing how new religious developments in individual empires were transmitted to very different imperial settings by adopting key technological and communicational mechanisms more familiar from the scholarship on globalization. The more specific contribution here is to show how such empire-based globalization transformed the geographical profile of religious activity worldwide through the emergence of a common typology of new religious spaces that owed their existence to the infrastructural efforts of individual empires, but which, in turn, provided homes for religious actors and organizations imported from quite different empires. The religious ‘hybridity’ so often associated with later 20th-century globalization is in this way seen to be a product of interactions *within* then *between* empires that flourished in specific types of religious environments that already emerged during the heyday of modern empires around 1870 and 1940.

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This sense of ‘within’ and ‘between’ forms the basis of this article’s model of a ‘transimperial’ approach to religious history. Hence, a ‘transimperial’ method can be defined as the recognition of the interplay between two tiers of historical processes: the first taking place at an *intra*-imperial level (that is, within a particular imperial society) and the second taking place at an *inter*-imperial level (that is, between two or more imperial societies).¹ To study transimperial religion is, therefore, to examine how these two tiers of historical developments interacted with one another to generate ‘globalized’ forms of religiosity on the back of ‘imperial’ religious transformations. Using the rubric of ‘transimperial’ rather than the more general ‘global’ thus allows us to foreground the importance of empires as the formative environments of the new religious entrepreneurs, organizations, and institutions that emerged during the heyday of modern empires before relocating to other empires to find new followers and undergo further adaptive transformations in turn.

Scholars of imperial religion have shown that empires were crucibles of intense religious transformation. Yet such *intra*-imperial developments—whether ritual, doctrinal, linguistic, or organizational—laid the basis for further *inter*-imperial developments as religious actors and organizations expanded beyond their original imperial crucibles and in so doing underwent a further round of transformation. The enabling sites of these developments were the new transimperial spaces discussed in the following sections. By surveying these spaces, we will see how the ‘hybridity’ often associated with religious globalization was a product of this two-tier transimperial process of accumulative acculturation as religious rituals, doctrines, languages, and organizations were adapted in sequence to the social, linguistic, and intellectual environments of one imperial environment than another.

This brings us squarely to the question of geography, to the specific types of environment in which such transimperial expressions of religiosity took shape. The following sections survey four types of transimperial religious space: steamship ports; railway towns; reinvigorated ancient pilgrimage sites; and inland or insular borderlands.² As Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé have written in their programmatic outline of transimperial history, ‘*trans-* also shifts the focus much more to spaces *in-between* and *beyond* empires. It has the potential to cross imperial boundaries and dislocate the centres. When it comes to actors who move across empires, the prefix *trans-* refers to ties across imperial frontiers, dual residencies or migration through multiple locales. It thereby refers to the agency of actors who feel at home in multiple imperial settings’ (Hedinger and Heé 2018, 432). This emphasis on spatiality is echoed by Cyrus Schayegh, who has similarly argued that ‘transimperial history can add much to geographically-informed analyses of spaces that flow across—*trans*—various sites and connect them’ (Schayegh 2017, 11). Such attention to connections between sites lies at the core of the model of transimperial religious geography developed in this article. As we will see, this crucial matter of spatial connections links this article to the emerging ‘infrastructural turn’ in the study of religion (Hoelzchen and Kirby 2024; Kirby 2024; Supp-Montgomerie 2021).

¹For a fuller theoretical treatment of this concept, see Green (forthcoming). Since the following pages draw on a huge secondary literature, the notes and bibliography refer only to the most relevant studies of the examples discussed here.

²Of course, these categories were not wholly discrete on the ground: most steamship ports were also rail hubs (though not all railway towns were steamship ports), while some pilgrimage places and borderlands were linked to rail or steamship networks. Hence, the typology is heuristic rather than absolute.

The following pages focus on the heyday of modern empires between around 1870 and 1940. These were decades of intense religious transformation—and innovation—through the interfusion of doctrines and rituals no less than the material and personnel of religion, both within and between different empires. The vast secondary literature on globalization has developed starkly different periods of ‘globalization’ (Lang 2006), ranging from a loose usage that would even speak of ancient globalization to a tighter remit restricted to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While an extensive engagement with such discussions of periodization is beyond the scope of this article, the focus here will be on what is conceived as the first era of globalization that was enabled by the communicational and commercial infrastructures of modern empires. Inaugurated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, this first era of globalization between around 1870 and 1940 was characterized by the intersecting infrastructures of different empires.

This means that empires should not be conceptualized as uniformly closed geographies, but as political units that included particular types of space (ports, railway towns, pilgrimage sites, and borderlands) open to religious actors, organizations, texts, and rituals derived from other empires. These specific types of space enabled what are conceived here as transimperial religious developments. Understanding these developments involves grappling with the religious use of imperial infrastructures; that is, the mechanisms of movement and communication that enabled some religious actors and organizations to propagate their version of a particular religion more widely across the world of empires than others. Yet ‘widely’ should not be taken to mean ‘everywhere,’ because our focus on geography shows that these specific types of space became key crucibles for religious innovation and propagation within between empires (Green 2020, 3–4).

Consequently, we will see how a transimperial approach draws the existing scholarship on religion and empire together with that on religion and globalization, particularly the emergent scholarship on religious infrastructures. However, in contrast to much of the existing literature on religious infrastructures, which focuses on the contemporary era of globalization (Burchardt 2023; Desplat 2024; Kirby 2024; Lanz 2015), the focus here on the earlier era of empire-based globalization around 1870 and 1940 allows us to recognize the historical background to more recent forms of religious globalization. This earlier period witnessed a series of new technologies of transport and methods of communication—steamships, trains, automobiles, and aeroplanes; mechanized printing in Asian and African no less than European languages; postage stamps and telephone calls; and intra- and inter-imperial lingua francas together with translations between an increasing variety of languages (Green 2024b; Headrick 1988; Kavka 2013). These technologies in turn enabled the expansion of new religious organizations across specific types of space—again, both within then between empires. Since this concurs with the recent definition of religious infrastructures ‘as enabling arrangements—social and technical ensembles that take on the role of making possible different practices and relations’ (Hoelzchen and Kirby 2024, 89), the broad survey offered in the following pages helps us discern the importance of empires—and the links between them—to modern global religiosity.

As to which empires are examined here, the article responds to Hedinger and Heé’s recommendation that ‘a transimperial approach would not only give non-European

empires—such as the Ottoman, the Chinese or Japanese—more space, it would also incorporate those European empires that have been marginalized... by bringing different kinds of empires into one analytic field' (Hedinger and Heé 2018, 430). The period between 1870 and 1940 witnessed not only the zenith and nadir of modern European imperialism but also the waxing and waning of Asian and African empires (whether those of the Qing and Japan or Ethiopia and Oman) alongside the American empire in the Pacific, the spaces of transimperial religion charted over the following pages reach across the far corners of the planet. Yet, we will see them conform to a fourfold spatial pattern of new steam port and railway cities, reinvigorated ancient pilgrimage sites and inland and insular borderlands.

Turning from the schematic to the specific, the following four sections draw together the secondary literature on imperial and global religiosity to provide a range of examples of four key processes of transformation in order to demonstrate their generality across a wide variety of imperial settings. These processes are pluralization; material-spatial reconfiguration; translation; and accumulative acculturation. As to which religions are surveyed, the primary focus is on Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist actors and organizations, along with the new religious movements of the period, such as Theosophy and Baha'ism. This is for two reasons. Firstly, because, in this period at least, these were all missionary religions that through their transimperial engagements with different communities created new spatial, social, and linguistic configurations rather than exporting and replicating existing religious formations through migration, though migrants were undoubtedly also major contributors to the adaptation of religious ideas and practices to their places of settlement. Secondly, the main focus lies on Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist actors and organizations because they made use of transimperial infrastructures to not only find new followers but also to try to merge or unify disparate and long separated communities they identified as 'fellow believers,' albeit believers who had gone astray and needed reform.

However, as we will see, in some cases, Jewish, Hindu, and Zoroastrian organizations also joined this latter endeavour by discovering 'lost' communities of 'fellow believers' they regarded as following 'corrupted' versions of the 'same' faith. In this respect, the emergence of standardizing categories of 'religion' and 'world religions' was not merely a matter of the artificial or dominating projection of European categories onto the non-European world (Asad 1993; Hirst and Zavos 2005). It was also a *sui generis* intellectual outcome of far greater interaction and integration between formerly disparate communities.

Turning from analytical generalizations to specific examples, the following sections use the rubric of different types of space to map the distinct geographical contexts in which transimperial religious processes unfolded. Here geography itself is historicized via new spaces—whether buildings or entire cities—that were products of imperial globalization and the transimperial transactions its infrastructures enabled.

Transimperial steam ports

Although ports were a longstanding feature of pre- and early modern imperial expansion and religious networking (Aslanian 2023), they became an amplified geographical feature of the age of modern empires due to imperial investments in the new transport technology of the steamship and its associated infrastructure.

Whether in financial, demographic, or strategic terms, the global significance of ports resulted not only from the maritime empires of the period (American, Omani, and Japanese no less than European) but also from the transimperial networks that were necessarily channelled through such interconnected ports. Consequently, from around 1870 there were more transimperial ports, with more people, from more places, who were not only generating distant ties with other regions but also constructing more buildings and founding more organizations for their domestic, social, commercial, administrative, and religious pursuits. Due to their role as key connecting points between different empires, port cities were especially religiously reshaped. In an era when the movement of individual religious entrepreneurs, collective organizations, and larger religious publics was enabled by the steamships that moved between such ports. The result was a port-based religious building boom. In some cases, this pulled centres of religious gravity away from older inland religious and economic geographies to port city hubs of demographic, social, and economic power whose resources were enhanced by their transimperial ties.

The sheer variety of transimperial networks that passed through such British-ruled ports as Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore provided resources for major religious construction projects. As a result of their infrastructural and thereby mercantile and financial importance, what had formerly been fishing villages or minor ports emerged as new religious centres. To give just a few examples of buildings founded by religious actors from Qajar Persia, the transimperial religious profile of this transformation of urban geography is seen in the Armenian churches of Calcutta and Rangoon; the resplendent mausoleum built in Bombay for the émigré Ismaili Shi'i leader Aga Khan I; and the grand Mogul mosque in Rangoon funded by Twelver Shi'i merchants from Iran. Singapore similarly played host to mosques constructed by Hadrami traders from the peripheries of Ottoman Yemen and to Chinese Buddhist institutions such as the Thian Hock Keng temple (founded in 1839) and the Phor Kark See monastery (built between 1920 and 1921), as well as *dargah* mausoleums and *gurudwaras* associated with Tamil Muslim and Punjabi Sikh migrants from India.

Meanwhile, Tamil Muslim traders from India expanded their networks to Saigon and Hanoi, the successive river-port capitals of French Indochina. In 1885, these merchants funded the construction of the Al-Noor mosque in Hanoi, followed by the Cholon mosque in Saigon, which was completed in 1932. Situated amid Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist temples, they introduced to French Southeast Asia the distinctive architectural style of Tamil diasporic mosques that had already been constructed in British Ceylon and Malaya.

The new treaty ports of China, Japan, and Korea likewise became more pluralistic religious spaces that alternatively competed or cooperated with the Confucianist, Daoist, Shinto, or Buddhist religious establishments of inland imperial capitals. Examples of these new organizations include the Moore Memorial Church (Mu En Tang) founded in Shanghai by American Methodist missionaries in 1887; the Anglican church of St Michael founded in Incheon in 1890; and the first purpose-built mosque in Japan that opened in Kobe in 1935 as a result of fundraising that brought together Indian Muslims based in Calcutta, Rangoon, and Singapore with Tokyo-based Tatar exiles from imperial Russia. African port cities were also visibly reshaped by this process. The East African entrepôt of the Omani then German empires at Zanzibar became

host to the Anglican Christ Church cathedral built between 1873 and 1879 and the Catholic cathedral of St. Joseph built by French missionaries between 1893 and 1898, as well as Isma'ili Shi'i religious institutions funded by Gujarati merchants from India. Smaller ports on the steamship infrastructure of the empire also became sites of new religious construction as with the Hindu temple and gurudwara established in the Persian port of Bandar Abbas, the latter likely linked to Sikh soldiers serving in the British Indian Army.³ Despite the existence of what is now an expansive secondary literature on urban 'cosmopolitanism' around the Indian Ocean, the degree to which the leaders or attendees of these different religious institutions, in any given locale, interacted with one another demands case-by-case studies before any generalizations can be made.

Still, transimperial religious actors certainly moved between these new port-based religious centres. Some had surprising backgrounds, as with the 'Irish Pongyi', U Dhammaloka, a migrant worker from County Dublin who after becoming part of a 'beachcomber' subculture of white subalterns, took Buddhist monastic vows in Rangoon. He spent his subsequent career sailing and proselytizing between Rangoon, Colombo, Bangkok, Singapore, and Yokohama, preaching and printing pamphlets on his ecumenically eclectic teachings (Bocking 2010). Other port-hopping religious actors included promoters of the new religion of Baha'ism that originated in Qajar Persia in the mid-19th century. After its persecuted leaders were exiled to Ottoman Iraq then British Palestine, the Baha'i scriptures were first published in Bombay, whence exiled Persian proselytizers sailed to other ports—Madras, then Rangoon, and beyond—converting Indian Muslims and Burmese Buddhists, not least through printing such periodicals as the trilingual Persian-English-Burmese journal *al-Ishraq* ('The Sunrise') of Rangoon (Green 2022).

These printed port city translations point to the close interplay between infrastructures and ideas. Some of the most vivid examples come from late 19th century China, where translations of Western geographical and geological works by Christian missionaries and Chinese scholars collaborating in treaty ports such as Shanghai enabled the local acquisition of technical knowledge and practical expertise concerning coal as Russian-, Chinese-, and German-sponsored railways began to reach inland from the coast. As a major hub of Christian missionary translation and printing, Shanghai also became the epicentre of China's second printing revolution by replacing traditional artisanal block printing with industrialized typography and lithography (Jansen, Klein, and Meyer 2014). These technologies were swiftly adopted by their Christian pioneers by local religious entrepreneurs as Shanghai—far from the historic inland temple sites of Buddhist block-printing—emerged as a new centre for Buddhist typography and lithography. Such port locations enabled the swifter transimperial exchange of religious texts and ideas—as well as technologies that Asia's own print entrepreneurs now adapted to their own traditions. Such was the case with the Juzhen Imitation Song Printing House, founded in Shanghai in 1916. After casting a typeset of characters reproducing the graceful Chinese calligraphy of the medieval Song Dynasty (960-1279), Juzhen industrially reproduced Confucian ethical and literary classics which were, in turn, exported to cognoscenti in Japan.

Shanghai too became a new centre of Chinese Muslim printing, much of which comprised journals—that new religious genre of the era—containing translations from

³A description and photographs of the Hindu temple from around 1970 appears in Varjavand (1351/1972, 115–118).

Arabic and Urdu periodicals printed in the port-cities of Cairo, Bombay, or Singapore. Such journals laid the foundation for more tangible contacts with religious organizations in India and Egypt, where several generations of Hui Muslim students would later travel for their higher educations. Nor were these religious developments necessarily separate in such transimperial hubs as Shanghai, where Silas Hardoon (1851-1931), an Iraqi Jewish merchant whose trading network spanned Ottoman Basra, British Bombay, and the international zone of Shanghai, endowed a Buddhist temple and funded the printing of Kalavinka Canon and a translation of the Quran into Chinese.

As early adaptors of the printing techniques developed by British and American Protestants, Calcutta, Bombay, Singapore, Shanghai (and to a lesser extent Batavia, and Colombo) became major multilingual publishing centres, issuing works on Asia's full range of religions in Malay, Arabic, Chinese, Marathi, Gujarati, Persian, and numerous other languages.

In response to early Dutch then British and American Christian missionary printing in Sinhala, combined with the Orientalist development of Pali printing, the Ceylonese port of Colombo emerged as a transimperial Buddhist printing centre linked to Siam, Japan, China, and even America (Blackburn 2010; Jaffe 2019). On the northern side of Ceylon, American missionaries promoted Tamil printing in the port of Jaffna, bringing new ideas not only to local Christian converts but also to Tamil Hindus across the sea in India. As in other such religio-technical encounters, cooperation played a role alongside competition. An important example is the print-based reform-cum-promotion of Buddhism through Sir Edwin Arnold's Christological depiction of the historical Buddha Siddhartha in his book-length poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), which was subsequently translated into numerous Asian languages, and the Catholic-modeled yet anti-Christian *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) by the American Buddhist convert Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907). Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism* was promptly translated into around a dozen Asian languages, including Sinhala, Japanese, and Thai (Green 2022). By 1930, even Herman Hesse's German hagiographical Buddhist novella *Siddhartha* (1922)—inspired by the importing of Buddhist ideas from imperial Britain to Germany—was published in Japanese as part of a new Japanese interest in India as the homeland of the historical Buddha.⁴

Together with the Russian émigré Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91), in 1875 Olcott had cofounded the Theosophical Society—alongside Spiritualism perhaps New York's most influential religious export—that soon established itself in Bombay then Madras, whence Olcott sailed south to Colombo, the port city capital of colonial Ceylon. There he encountered the influential Anglophone Ceylonese Buddhist, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), whom he provided with a most effective apprenticeship as a religious entrepreneur. Turning the Christian missionaries' printing tools against them, Olcott—then more fully Dharmapala in his own right—spearheaded a Theravada Buddhist revival that attracted Japanese and Burmese Buddhist students to Ceylon, as well as some of the first Buddhist converts in modern India, such as Dharmanand Kosambi (1876-1947), a Hindu brahmin whose first positive exposure to Buddhism had come through reading a Marathi translation of Arnold's *Light of Asia*. After studying Pali in Ceylon, Kosambi began translating ancient Pali scriptures for fellow Indians, beginning

⁴More broadly, see Jaffe (2010).

with the *Laghu-patha*, which he published from Bombay in 1917—alongside a Marathi translation, just as the Christian missionaries had done with their Gospel translations before him.

Other transimperial religious actors in the early 20th century traversed port-based geographies that linked the Middle East with East Asia and Africa. Ottoman Muslim religious instructors were sent to both the late Qing imperial capital of Beijing and the British-ruled South African port of Cape Town, where they interacted respectively with the Hui Chinese minority of China and the so-called ‘Malay’ Muslims whose community originated at the Cape as exiles were sent there from different corners of the Dutch East Indies (Gençoğlu 2018; Papas 2013).

African ports also became spaces for religious export, not least of books. Printing also developed on the opposite coasts of Africa in ports such as Lagos and Zanzibar, the latter through its Muslim and Christian ties with Bombay and Hamburg. Meanwhile, in the far north of the continent, the great river port of Cairo took advantage of its early start when, in the aftermath of Napoleon’s invasion, the first Egyptian-owned press was established in the dockside district of Bulaq. By the latter part of the 19th century, Cairo had become a transimperial Arabic printing centre, issuing manuscripts sent for printing from the Dutch East Indies no less than Zanzibar, Comoros, and Ethiopia, including what appears to have been the first Ethiopian Muslim text to be printed (in British-ruled Cairo) (Bang 2011; Gori 2015; Gori 2022).

Closer steam routes between the ports of different empires also connected disparate Jewish communities, both through printed texts and organizations. One example is the Marathi-speaking Bene Israel community of western India, who through seeking work in nearby Bombay were brought into contact with—and gradually placed under the religious tutelage of—wealthy educated Baghdadian Jewish merchants who relocated to Bombay from Ottoman Iraq. By 1884, Sir Jacob Elias Sassoon (1844–1916), scion of the grandest of these Iraqi Jewish trading dynasties, established the Kneset Eliyahu synagogue in Bombay which, with its neoclassical design by the British architectural practice Gostling & Morris, presented rural Bene Israel Marathi-speaking Indian Jewish migrants from the city’s rural hinterlands with a tangible impression of a modern, enlightened, and urbane form of their ‘own’ religion. A parallel process took place in Shanghai between the same ‘Indo-Iraqi’ Jewish trading diaspora (not least the Sassoon family) and the Sinicized Yicilèyè or ‘Kaifeng Jews’.

The Pacific coast of the United States from Washington down through California also provided new spaces of transimperial religious interaction as its ports grew into cities funded by increasing trans-Pacific trade. After the emergence of the U.S. Pacific empire in 1898, the opening of the Panama Canal provided the excuse for America’s grand imperial debut by way of the Panama–Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915 (Moore 2013). But even in the decades before 1900, the growing ports of the West Coast had begun to see the appearance of Japanese temples, Sikh gurudwaras, and Chinese ‘joss houses’ (a term taken from the earlier Portuguese imperial experience of *deos*—‘god’ or ‘idol’—houses across Asia). By 1912, Punjabi migrant farmers in California’s Central Valley founded a gurudwara in Stockton, the first in the United States. Seven years earlier, Japanese migrants to California had founded a Los Angeles branch of Kyoto’s Nishi Hongwanji-ha, which as the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple became the first purpose-built Buddhist temple in Los Angeles,

where it was rebuilt by the architect Edgar Cline in 1925. It was visited that year by Count Ōtani Kōzui (1876–1948), abbot of the powerful Nishi Hongan-ji temple in Kyoto and head of the Honganji-ha sect of Japanese Buddhism, who had earlier explored the ancient Buddhist monasteries of the former Han Empire in remote western China.

California also hosted—then exported—new religions, including the Baha’i faith that had been founded in Qajar Persia before flourishing in Ottoman and British imperial exile, where it found printed expression in English on the way to the ports of the American Pacific. Hence, it was from San Francisco that the American convert Sydney Sprague (1875–1943) sailed to promote Baha’ism (albeit via English) in the highland railway town of Mandalay in British-controlled Burma. Other Californians sailed across the Pacific to preach Baha’ism in imperial Japan (where they relied instead on the Esperanto invented in the Polish borderlands of imperial Russia). Other Asian religions were finding new port-city outposts in California. By 1900, the influential Hindu reformist Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) had founded the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, which through its numerous West Coast branches (not least the Vedanta Church in Hollywood) set in motion the Californian embrace of Yoga that in a later era of globalization would be reexported worldwide (Kim 2024).

This survey of port cities in so many regions of the world points to a common set of developments—religious pluralization, material-spatial reconfiguration, and translations—as the infrastructural connections between empires that concentrated in ports enabled these spaces to become home to previously unfamiliar religions, new religious institutions, and centres for the disseminated of new or unfamiliar teachings through printed translations of books from distant world regions. In turn, the density of these activities in such ports, then between them, enabled the further process of accumulative acculturation as one sequence of architectural, organizational, ritual, linguistic, and doctrinal adaptations to a new port-city and its inhabitants provided the material, social, and semantic resources for another sequence of religious adaptations in turn.

Transimperial railway towns

However, the new geography of the transimperial religion was not restricted to maritime coastal regions because the infrastructures of transimperial trade that clustered around port cities also reached inland via railways. Two notable examples include the Uganda Railway which linked Mombasa with the upland interior of Uganda and Kenya, and the Gyeongin Line opened in 1899 as Korea’s first railway that initially linked the treaty port of Incheon to Seoul, before reaching south six years later to the Japanese-dominated port of Busan. Consequently, such inland railway towns were, in turn, transformed as transimperial religious actors and organizations followed these new rail routes and established themselves in major inland rail hubs, which might comprise newly founded or preexisting urban centres. Thus, after Seoul was declared the capital of the short-lived Empire of Korea in 1897, then annexed by imperial Japan in 1910, its cityscape was transformed into a newly pluralistic religious geography as new actors, organizations, and material and technological resources were carried in via the Gyeongin Line. For the previous five centuries, Korea’s Chosen dynasty had banned from Seoul both foreigners and their religions to maintain state-imposed neo-Confucian orthodoxy: even Korea’s own Buddhist institutions had been banished from the capital to the

countryside. But the forced opening of Korea's ports by Japan (followed by Russia, the US and the major European powers) together with the lifting of the ban on missionaries written into several treaties, led to an influx of religious actors and organizations, who followed the rail tracks to found new religious institutions and communities in preexisting cities such as Seoul or newly-founded ones such as Nairobi, which was only established in 1899 as the inland rail depot for the Uganda Railway.

Hence, in inland rail hubs and coastal ports alike, the result was a startling transformation of urban space. Whether in Africa or Asia, the churches built by European and American missionaries were unfamiliar in style and building materials by way of brick-built Gothic architecture. They also featured tall spires which, in being built (partly for health reasons) on hilltops, towered above the low-roofed wooden cityscape in heaven-reaching triumph. By 1903, Seoul's Catholic and Protestant churches had been joined by the Russian Orthodox church of St Nicholas, creating a transimperial geography that continued to expand after Korea was absorbed into the Japanese Empire in 1910—not least because British, French, American, and Russian Christian missionaries were also active in Japan itself. Inland from the Korean port of Nanpo (which opened to foreign trade in 1897), so many churches were built in Pyongyang by competing American, British, and European denominations that the northern Korean city became known as the 'Jerusalem of the East' (Kim and Kim 2015).

These churches were truly transimperial constructions. For example, the Myeongdong Catholic cathedral in Seoul was designed by Eugène Coste (1842-96) of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, who had previously served in Hong Kong and Singapore and whose employment of émigré Chinese labourers and masons introduced traditional Sinitic design elements into the cathedral décor (Kim 2018).⁵ The transformation of religious space in Seoul was by no means solely Christian. The city also became host to formerly forbidden Buddhist temples—in some cases through cooperation with similarly marginalized Buddhist groups from Japan—as well as, by the 1930s, to a Shinto shrine erected as part of the Japanese sponsorship of emperor-associated *jinja* shrines across Manchuria and Taiwan.

Yet Japan's own new rail cities were being transformed by its transimperial ties. Inland from the erstwhile treaty port of Yokohama, to which Tokyo was joined by Japan's first railway, the Japanese capital was itself transformed by churches, such as the Catholic cathedral of St. Joseph built in 1874 by the Missions Étrangères de Paris. With its European neoclassical design, the cathedral was one of the earliest architectural imports of the architectural transformative Meiji period which clustered around Tokyo's railway station in the Marunouchi and Ginza neighbourhoods. By 1891, the Nikorai-dō Russian Orthodox cathedral was inaugurated in Tokyo by the monk, missionary, and translator Nikolay Kassatkin (1836-1912), who was subsequently canonized as St Nicholas of Japan. By 1938, Tokyo was also home to an impressive mosque founded by pro-Tsarist Tatar and Bashkir refugees from the former Russian Empire who found political and financial support from Japanese associations and corporations with interests in Russia-adjacent Manchuria (Usmanova 2007). Building on late Ottoman print-mediated contacts with Japan, the mid-1930s also saw the Tatar exiles print the much-publicized 'Tokyo Quran', copies of which were dispatched by the Japanese foreign ministry to

⁵On similar patterns in China, see Coomans (2018).

Muslim communities across Asia (Haneda 2010; Misawa 2009). The Tokyo Mosque was in part a reward. With its architectural combination of Russian church steeple and Ottoman/Orthodox dome, the mosque was to host numerous transimperial encounters between its regular Tatar and Bashkir worshippers, the Ottoman-linked-and-late-Qing-Beijing-visiting Siberian imam Abd al-Rashid Ibrahim (1857–1944), and an assorted congregation of Japanese converts, Afghan and Egyptian diplomats, and Indian and Malay language teachers at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages (Tōkyō gaikokugo gakkō) (Yamazaki 2014).

Train routes also linked inland cities with transimperial pilgrim routes (Green 2013, 2015b). A case in point is the many Russian imperial Muslims from the inland Volga-Ural region and beyond who were able to use the empire's expansive rail network to reach the port of Odessa from where they continued their journey to Mecca by steamship (and in some cases the Hijaz Railway). In 1908 another Russian imperial subject, the aforementioned Ibrahim, began his journey to Mecca in Tokyo, taking a circuitous steam itinerary that took him to the Korean port of Busan, then across Korea by train via the pioneering Gyeongin Line, holding religious discussions with local Buddhists and Confucianists via his Japanese interpreter. He later crossed India by train, departing for Arabia from Bombay before printing an account of his proselytizing travels in late Ottoman Istanbul. As he recorded in his travelogue, his preaching itinerary across the Russian, Qing, Japanese, British, and Ottoman empires was thus enabled by the inter-linked imperial infrastructures of both steamships and railways that included the Trans-Siberian, Manchurian, Gyeongin, Indian, and Hijaz railways. As railways spread across the Middle East, in 1915 the Tabriz–Julfa line linked the crumbling empires of Qajar Iran and Romanov Russia, followed in 1922 by a railway that linked Quetta in British-ruled Baluchistan with Dozdab (now Zahedan) in Iran. Large numbers of Indian workers and traders flocked into Dozdab (Koyagi 2021), prompting the opening of a Sikh gurudwara in 1927, while Indian Zoroastrian Parsis used the new line to visit their ancestral homeland (Ranganathan 2023).

In China, the last decades of the Qing empire saw several inland cities being connected to the coast—thence other empires—by rail. In the case of Harbin in Manchuria, an entirely new city emerged as the offspring of railway construction on the iron isthmus between the Qing, Russian, and Japanese empires. Founded in 1898 by a Polish engineer working for the Russian-built Chinese Eastern Railway, Harbin soon became home to mosques, synagogues, and churches, followed in 1921 by the Chinese Buddhist Jile Temple (Bakich 1986; Clausen and Thøgersen 1995). The arrival of Russian imperial Tatar Muslims into this corner of historical China in turn led to the foundation of a printing press that issued religious works in Tatar (Usmanova 2007), while immigrant Jews from the western end of the Russian Empire began publishing Yiddish texts in Harbin, some seven thousand kilometres from the heartlands of Yiddish beyond the far western Pale of Settlement.

In contrast to the newly founded Harbin, Nanjing offers an example of a far older city that by the end of the 19th century was linked to other imperial spaces by rail and, via Shanghai, by steamship. Like other port cities and railway towns, Nanjing became a new printing centre in turn as it joined Shanghai in replacing traditional Chinese block printing with modern forms of typography. Hence, in the late 1860s, the Chinese Buddhist reformer Yang Wenhui (1837–1911) moved to Nanjing to establish

his Jinling Sutra Publishing House (Jinlíng kèjīng chù), before using the cities rail link with Shanghai to make several steamship journeys to France and Britain, where he met European Sinologists and Buddhologists and accessed rare manuscripts that he would, in turn, print in Nanjing (Tarocco 2008). It was in Britain that Yang met the Japanese Buddhist priest Nanjō Bun'yū (1849–1927), who as part of a parallel recovery of early Buddhist teachings that were unknown in East Asia had similarly travelled to Europe in 1876 to learn Sanskrit from the German linguist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) at Oxford University (Zumoto and Takakusu 2004). From the Japanese Nanjō, via European scholarly intermediaries, the Chinese Wang acquired copies of several hundred Chinese Buddhist sutras which had been lost in China itself; returning to Nanjing, Wang then printed them through his Jinling Sutra Publishing House. For his part, Nanjō similarly used modern typography to publish ancient Buddhist texts he had found at the British Library, such as the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Sanskrit: ‘Discourse of the Descent into Sri Lanka’).⁶ He printed it in Kyoto, which in 1877 had been linked by rail to the erstwhile treaty ports of Osaka and Yokohama.

In this transimperial fashion, Qing, Japanese, British, and Russian imperial networks intersected through the movement of persons and texts, rituals and teachings.

Like Abd al-Rashid Ibrahim’s writing of his far-flung travels in Turkish, in the decades either side of 1900 rail-traveling Jews likewise published accounts of their journeys in Yiddish (Garrett 2003, 90–122). In both the Muslim and Jewish cases alike, the train formed a new infrastructure of religious encounter, for as Leah Garrett has written, ‘the train, then, is a vehicle for new contacts: between Jews, between Jews and Christians, and between Jews and international and domestic tales’ (Garrett 2003, 121). Such railway writings form an overlooked record of transimperial religious encounters, such as those similarly described by the Russian Tatar religious reformer Fatih Karimi (1870–1937), who in 1899 set off on the railway journey through Europe that he recorded in his *Yavrupa Siyahatnamese* (‘European Travelogue’). Therein, Karimi described such matters as the freedoms and education of women that provided empirical evidence for his attempts to modernize Muslim practice among his fellow Tatars as a member of the reformist Jadid movement (Baldauf 2005; Rorlich 1985).

No part of the planet saw more railway construction during this period than the United States. Chicago’s place in this new global religious geography was announced by the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, which through its transport infrastructure drew together established religious authorities and ascendant impresarios from across the Pacific and Atlantic alike (Harris 2019; Seager 1995). In 1921, it was another new railroad hub—Detroit—that America’s first purpose-built mosque was constructed through the combined efforts of Arab and Albanian factory workers, a Lebanese property dealer, an American architect, and an Indian Ahmadi *imam* who reached the city after sailing from London to Philadelphia, whence he boarded a train for the booming urban Midwest (Green 2015a, 207–34). By 1938, after the Canadian Pacific then Calgary and Edmonton railways opened the Northwest Territories (now Alberta) to settlements, the first mosque in Canada—the Al-Rashid mosque—was inaugurated in Alberta through the similarly combined efforts of migrants and traders from Ottoman Lebanon, a Ukrainian architect who incorporated elements of Orthodox church design (as in Tokyo), and the

⁶The rediscovery is described in Bun’yū (1923, v–x).

celebrated Indian Quran translator, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953), who graced the opening ceremony. Many non-Muslim migrants also emigrated from British India, such as the Punjabi traders who founded Sikh Gurudwaras in inland Bangkok in 1912 and Tehran in 1921. In 1893, the Ceylonese Buddhist missionary Dharmapala traversed America by train to lecture with great success at the World Parliament of Religions in inland Chicago. There he initiated Charles T. Strauss, a successful New York lace goods dealer, who not only became the first US convert to Buddhism but also the forerunner of the enduring social phenomenon of American Jewish Buddhists (Sigalow 2019). Yet Strauss's impact was not limited to the United States: in 1926, as part of India's rediscovery of its lost Buddhist past, Strauss's introduction to Buddhism was translated into Urdu and published in inland Lahore as *Bodh aur uska Mat* ('Buddha and his Creed').

Meanwhile, the interior spaces of the great African continent were similarly seeing religious transformations that were not necessarily dominated by European actors. A case in point is the Ethiopian Empire, which in the 1860s and 1970s the Russian Orthodox monk Porfirij Uspensky (1804-85) proposed transforming into an ecclesiastical colony of the Russian Orthodox Church. By the end of the 19th century, especially after the opening of the French-built Chemin de Fer Djibouto-Éthiopien from the coast in 1901, growing commercial opportunities in Ethiopia attracted more cooperative Orthodox actors via Armenian trading companies from the Ottoman Empire, such as the Maison Kevorkoff. As Ethiopia's Armenian community grew with the arrival of refugees from the 1915 genocide, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St. George was inaugurated in Addis Ababa in 1928. As a cousin church in the great family of Orthodoxy, it was dedicated to the same saint as the city's Ethiopian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George, which back in 1896 had been designed back in 1896 by the Sicilian engineer Sebastiano Castagna (1868-1938) and built with the labour of Italian prisoners of war captured during the Ethiopian victory that year at Adwa. A symbol of victory as it was for Emperor Menelik II (r.1889-1913), its design was nonetheless a version of Italian Renaissance neoclassicism adapted to the liturgy of Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodoxy.

However, the most dramatic example of an Ethiopian railway town was not the older imperial capital of Addis Ababa, but the entirely new Dire Dawa, which owed its foundation in 1902 to the geographical exigencies of railway engineering (Wolde-Michael 1973). Over the next few decades, this boom town counterpart to Nairobi and Harbin attracted new religious actors to this imperial Ethiopian rail hub ranging from Ottoman Armenians and Greeks to French Capuchin missionaries and Hindus and Muslims from British India, Egypt, and Aden, who took the train from the French imperial port of Djibouti. As in the case of port cities, new rail hubs consequently became sites for the introduction of new architectural styles, such as the Greek Orthodox church constructed in Dire Dawa in 1921. Moreover, the influx of new residents to inland African rail cities such as Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa created a demand for new translation practices (Eshete 1973). These too had religious dimensions, whether by way of permissions for founding new institutions or for the undertaking of pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca, both now accessible by a combination of steamships and trains. As the railway to Djibouti enabled easier access to Egypt and Palestine, more complex patterns of religious circulation developed, whether by way of the printing in Cairo of Arabic books written by Ethiopian Muslims (Gori 2015, 2022) or the closer interaction of Ethiopian monks with their Coptic and Greek Orthodox counterparts.

In sum, we have seen that the spaces of the transimperial religion included the port cities that have long been a feature of the scholarship of globalization. Inland rail cities—including such entirely new urban spaces—were also important sites of transimperial religious exchange and innovation, albeit spaces that have received very little attention from historians of religion.

Reinvigorated pilgrimage sites

As the previous section has already hinted, between around 1870 and 1940 the new transimperial infrastructure also reinvigorated, and at the same time transformed, preexisting spaces of pilgrimage. The falling costs and greater security offered by steamship and train networks allowed far greater numbers of people to travel to distant holy places. The influx of capital and concern for these sites resulted in building booms or ‘restoration’ projects that transformed the architectural and in many cases also the ritual landscapes of ancient places of pilgrimage. A case in point is the early Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Bodhgaya in India, whose great Mahabodhi temple had been transformed after the medieval disappearance of Buddhism from India into a place of Hindu worship, only to be reclaimed from the late 19th century by new transimperial Buddhist religious actors and organizations from outside India (Geary 2017; Kemper 2014).

The key figure here was the aforementioned Ceylonese monk Dharmapala, whose apprenticeship as a religious entrepreneur with the Theosophical Buddhist Colonel Olcott, saw Dharmapala not only transform himself into a new kind of Buddhist missionary—a *dhammaduta*—but also establish the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891 to reclaim for Buddhism Bodhgaya’s Mahabodhi temple. After the Society relocated from Colombo to Calcutta a year later, it drew support from a transimperial spectrum of Buddhist supporters from Burma, Nepal, Siam, Japan, French Indochina, and America. The most visible outcomes were the architectural and demographic transformation of the erstwhile minor pilgrimage town for Hindus as the arrival of increasing numbers of Buddhist pilgrims from so many world regions led to the construction of a sequence of new monasteries, temples, and multilingual texts and styles of sculpture associated with those non-Indian schools of Buddhism.

Another case of the transimperial recovery—and similarly contested reclaiming—of ancient Buddhist spaces involved the sand-buried cities of the Silk Road in the remote Chinese provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang, particularly the Mogao Caves near the oasis of Dunhuang. As central power over these remote regions crumbled during China’s late Qing and early Republican eras, cave temples, monasteries, and libraries (which also contained texts on Manichaeism and other religious traditions) became spaces of transimperial archaeological competition that was also shaped by religious motives. The ‘foreign devils’ (*gwáilóu*) were transimperial scholars like Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943), the Hungarian doyen of imperial British archaeological adventuring. They also included such religious actors as the aforementioned Count Ōtani Kōzui, the head of the Honganji-ha sect of Japanese Buddhism who, while studying in London, had come into contact with both Stein and his Swedish rival, Sven Hedin (1865–1952). Competitively inspired, between 1902 and 1910, Ōtani led and funded three expeditions to the ancient Buddhist sites of imperial Chinese Inner Asia, starting from the Russian port capital of Saint Petersburg and then approaching Chinese territory by train (Galambos

2014). For Ōtani, the venture was one of the recovery of Japan's own Buddhist heritage along the very route that had transferred his religion from India in ancient times.

The activities of Ōtani, Hedin, and Stein involved both subtle and material transfers as ideas as well as objects moved between empires. Thus, as manuscripts and frescos were exported by camel, train and ship to Kyoto and Calcutta, Berlin and London, the term 'Silk Road' was adopted into both Japanese (*shiruku rodo*) and Chinese (*sichou zhi lu*) through the translation of Hedin's Swedish book *Sidenvagen* ('Silk Road') and Stein's *On Ancient Central Asian Tracks*. This connecting historiographical concept enabled new Asian understandings of the Buddhist past that were inescapably tied to the modern transimperial era, for the originally German neologism 'Silk Road' (*Seidenstrasse*) had been invented by the geologist Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833–1905) during his employment by the ailing Qing government on a mission to prospect coal reserves for a railway to link the provinces with the imperial capital (Wu 2014). Meanwhile, by way of objects of religious art, material religious transfers from the ancient religious sites of Chinese Inner Asia, found their way not only to Europe's imperial capitals but also to the cities of imperial Japan and its colony in Korea after the Japanese industrialist Kuhara Fusanosuke (1869–1965) bought part of the Ōtani collection from his villa in Kobe and in 1916 donated it to the Governor-General of Korea, where it remains today in Seoul.

Despite the origins of the modern museum in the secularizing European Enlightenment, in other world regions, newly founded museums served some visitors as a new type of pilgrimage site. In Korea, Japan, India, Europe, and the United States, new object spaces were being created by way of museums dedicated to such religio-archaeological discoveries. Housing religious objects carried from other imperial spaces, such museums thus served as a new kind of religious space through the devotion of visitors who regarded their holdings as enchanted sacred relics rather than disenchanting historical or aesthetic objects. In some cases, museum visits led to revivals of lost forms of representation.

This was the case with the Gandhara Buddhist statue of the 'Fasting Siddhartha' found at Sikri-Jamal Garhi in the North-West Frontier Province of British India then displayed at the Lahore Museum from 1894, which through its photographic reproduction then distribution to Siam, where at the royal request of King Rama V (r.1868-1910), who also based his wider reforms on an 1872 tour of British India, the sculpture was copied in physical form. After the British imperial government presented Rama V with an excavated stone casket of bone fragments purportedly from the body of the Buddha Siddhartha, 1904 the king sponsored the building of the Nittai-ji ('Japan-Thai Temple') to house the relics in the Japanese industrial port of Nagoya. Fourteen years later, a special stupa was built for the relics in the ancient Gandharan style of Northwest India and Afghanistan. It was designed by Itō Chūta (1867-1954), who had studied at Tokyo University with Josiah Conder (1852–1920), the British émigré architect of the aforementioned Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Tokyo. After study tours of China, India, Burma, Ceylon, the Ottoman Empire, and Britain, Itō had also previously designed the Kobe villa of Count Ōtani that housed the latter's Silk Road treasures before their transfer to Korea. In such ways, excavations, ancient objects, and new buildings came together to create distinctly transimperial sacred spaces.

Other cases of modern transimperial interactions with ancient religious spaces saw pilgrimage centres reinvigorated by the cumulative wealth carried in by increasing

numbers of steam pilgrims. Both late Ottoman Jerusalem and Mecca witnessed a vast increase in pilgrim numbers enabled by steamships to Jaffa (for Jerusalem) and Jeddah (for Mecca) from Europe (including imperial Russia) and the United States in the former case and the Dutch and British domains in South and Southeast Asia in the latter case (Kane 2015; Ockey 2011; Papas, Welsford, and Zarccone 2012; Tagliacozzo 2013). Between 1908 and 1920, the substantially Indian Muslim-funded and German-engineered Hijaz Railway offered a new overland route to Medina, with a branch line to the Mediterranean ports of Haifa and Acre. After the earliest Japanese conversions to Islam—an unexpected religious consequence of diplomatic links with the Ottomans and commercial links with Muslim merchants in the Dutch East Indies and British India—the first Japanese pilgrims travelled to Mecca, where they joined Chinese Hui who took steamships from either Shanghai or Rangoon, south of Yunnan in British Burma (Koyagi 2013; Mao 2011). It was from the Japanese and Qing empires that minority Muslims used transimperial transport infrastructures to reach Mecca. Since its conquest of Pattani in the 1780s, the Rattanakosin Empire of Siam also included a minority community of Malay-speaking Muslims who by the late 19th century were reaching Mecca and Medina in larger numbers (Bradley 2016; Ockey 2011). Once settled in late Ottoman Hijaz, these Siamese imperial Muslims encountered a larger community of ‘Jawi’ Malay-speakers from the Dutch and British territories in Southeast Asia.

The resulting influx of pilgrims led to the construction and renovation of many religious buildings, mosques and churches, and also madrasas, church schools, pilgrim hostels, mission stations, and increasingly hospitals. A similar pattern played out on a smaller but significant scale around the Shi‘i *‘atabat* shrines of Iraq, which under Ottoman then British control received increasing amounts of pilgrim traffic and revenues from the vast Shi‘i population of British India, as well as the wealthy Indian Ismaili Shi‘i trading diasporas in German and British East Africa, and the treaty ports of China and Japan. In the wake of World War I, new motor car and bus routes also linked Mecca and Jerusalem to the ports of Jeddah and Beirut, whence in the latter case motor roads extended as far as the Shi‘i shrines of Karbala and Najaf.

Meanwhile, new pilgrimage spaces emerged, such as the Baha’i pilgrim geographies created as a result of the exile of Qajar Persian founders of Baha’ism to the erstwhile Ottoman- then British-ruled cities of Iraq and then Palestine. From the mid-19th century, new transimperial sacred geographies commemorating figures from the historical (if not ancient) past were developing in Japan and then Korea around the martyrdom sites of Catholic missionaries and converts executed in the late sixteenth and mid-19th century. After 1862, when Pope Pius IX canonized the first twenty-six missionary and convert martyrs executed back in 1598 at the command of Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the gothic-style Basilica of the Twenty-Six Holy Martyrs of Japan was constructed in 1864 to mark the holy space of their martyrdom in what was by then the treaty port of Nagasaki. In 1925, Pope Pius XI beatified a further seventy-nine Catholics executed in the sporadic nineteenth-century Korean persecutions of Christianity after its ban in 1807. Amplified by martyrological literature in Japanese and Korean, this led to the evolution of new urban pilgrimage itineraries that included not only churches but also early preaching sites and the houses of early converts.

Yet despite their early start, and the bloody spiritual capital of the cult of martyrs, the Catholic Church faced much competition in Northeast Asia, not least from American

religious organizations that included not only the major Protestant denominations but also the Seventh Day Adventists, whose emissaries arrived in Korea in the 1900s after a preparatory phase of trans-Pacific acculturation among the Japanese and Koreans of Hawaii, then in Japan itself. Even the Church of Latter-Day Saints dispatched missionaries to India (1851) and Japan (1901), where they preached from their *Book of Mormon*—first published in Palmyra, New York in 1830—about the ancient sacred geography of Jehovah’s people discovered in America by their prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44) (Britsch 1998). In 1882, the Theosophical Society founded in New York by the Russian imperial émigrée Madame Blavatsky and the American Henry Steel Olcott shifted its headquarters to Adyar, near the port of Madras in British India, from where they printed and preached about their own holy land in the Qing imperial borderlands of Tibet. Telegraphy—an infrastructural term which would generate the occult neologism telepathy—also played its part in the transmission and invention of new religious doctrines, whether in New York or Bombay (Green 2011; Supp-Montgomerie 2021).

Even the most ancient pilgrimage sites were transformed through transimperial processes in the era of imperial globalization. As we have seen, preexisting places of pilgrimage underwent demographic pluralization and material-spatial reconfiguration through their incorporation into new infrastructures, which, in turn, prompted the publication of new and the translation of old texts. Such reinvigoration of ancient sites also included the archaeological rediscovery of long-forgotten spaces and the relocation of cult statues and other relics to museums, which served as new spaces for religious material culture. When combined, these developments accumulative acculturation in which change fed off change, especially in major pilgrimage sites that saw a dense concentration of transimperial religious activity.

Transimperial borderlands

Whereas the Theosophical Tibet was an imaginary place, Himalayan towns, such as Lhasa, Kathmandu, and Kalimpong, became venues for more tangible forms of transimperial religious exchanges between Buddhists and Muslims from China, India, and even Japan (Atwill 2018; Green 2022; LeVine and Gellner 2005; Mosca 2020).⁷ Other transimperial borderlands also became spaces of heightened religious activity as new spaces of transimperial religion emerged in imperial borderlands that were often remote from major ports and imperial capitals.

Another mountainous case is the Caucasus, which in the wake of the Russian conquests of Ottoman and Qajar territories in the first half of the 19th century became a borderland between all three empires to which religious actors flocked from elsewhere. One such figure was the German Lutheran Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803–65), who was deployed by Britain’s Church Missionary Society (CMS) to the highland Caucasian town of Shusha, the former capital of the Karabakh Khanate. There, Pfander established a mission station that sponsored new social formations by ransoming Caucasian people enslaved and converted by Qajar and Ottoman Muslims then ‘reverting’ them to Christianity (albeit according to the Protestant rather than Armenian or Georgian rites). After learning Persian, Armenian, and the local dialect of Tatar Turkish, and with the help of

⁷On the imagined of Tibet, see Lopez (1998).

local Christians, Pfander published his anti-Muslim polemic, *Mizan al-Haqq* (The Balance of Truth), on the mission's imported press in Shusha (Green 2012; Schirrmacher 1992). But in 1837, after Tsar Nicolas I (r. 1825-55) closed the liberalizing window that had permitted foreign missions in imperial Russia, the CMS sent Pfander to northern India. There, after his *Mizan al-Haqq* was translated and republished in Urdu, he held a public debate in 1854 with the Muslim scholar Rahmatullah Kairanawi (1818-91), who a decade later responded in print to Pfander's book by writing *Izhar al-Haqq* (The Demonstration of Truth), which adopted German Protestant techniques of philological scriptural criticism into Arabic to undermine the Bible rather than the Quran. First published in the Ottoman port city capital of Istanbul, in a counter-career to Pfander's book, it was subsequently translated into Turkish, Urdu, and Bengali and published in India, before being reissued in Chinese translation in Beijing in 1922.

In the meantime, Pfander had moved to another borderland: Peshawar on the Afghan frontier—recently wrested from the Sikh Empire—where he co-founded another CMS mission station. The Peshawar mission went on to convert some of the very first Pashtun Christians, who not only carried the first Pashto printed books across the border into Afghanistan but also acted as evangelical intermediaries to the so-called Kafir ('infidel') communities in the remote mountains of the Afghan Hindu Kush (Green 2024a). While Pashtun Christian missionaries traversed perilous mountain ranges on foot, other border-crossing religious actors from South Asian made easier use of transimperial travel infrastructures. Such was the case with the Punjabi traders, railway workers, and soldiers who as noted earlier in the 1920s established a Sikh Gurdwara in the railway town of Dozdab in the Iranian borderlands with British-administered Baluchistan. Similar interactions also led to the founding at Gosht in Iranian Baluchistan of a madrasa franchise of the great Indian Dar al-'Ulum seminary at Deoband by Sunni Baluch who had studied in British India (Dudoignon 2017).

Developments in inland borderland regions could also be linked with distant ports. In the early 20th century, the Theosophy-inspired revival of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon Colombo spread to the landlocked Kathmandu Valley of Nepal via Calcutta. Buddhism had previously been disenfranchised in the densely populated valley by the establishment of the modern Nepali state by the Hindu Gorkhas in 1769 (LeVine and Gellner 2005). This reduction in the status of Buddhism and Buddhists was further institutionalized when, after a state visit to France, in 1854 the Nepali ruler Maharaja Jang Bahadur inaugurated the *Muluki Ain*, a new legal code that used French models of legal standardization to impose Hindu caste laws and social hierarchy across Nepal's entire population. But by the 1900s, Buddhism was being propagated in the Indian port of Calcutta as a result of the Ceylonese missionary Dharmapala moving the headquarters of the Maha Bodhi Society he cofounded with Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of the Buddhaphilic *Light of Asia* we have seen being translated as far away as Japan. However, Calcutta was also attracting many merchants from Nepal, followed by a small number of students. Among the latter was a young Nepalese Buddhist called Jagat Man Vaidya (1902-63), who in 1923 enrolled at Calcutta University. Learning of the Maha Bodhi Society, Vaidya met Dharmapala and was inspired to learn the Pali language of the Theravada canon. Determined to bring Dharmapala's Buddhist revival to his homeland, around 1925 in Calcutta, Vaidya founded *Buddha Dharma wa Nepal Bhasa*, a trilingual journal in Nepali, Newari, and Hindi, languages into which he translated ancient texts

from Pali, before using returning Nepalese traders to export his port city publication to the landlocked transimperial borderland that was the Kathmandu Valley.

As Vaidya's print-based revival gathered pace in exile, the Buddhist Society of Nepal was established in the ancient inland Indian Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Sarnath. Operating between Sarnath and the Kathmandu Valley, despite opposition from Nepal's ruling Hindu Rana elite, this new generation of Buddhist activists was able to counter the Hindu caste-based inequality they faced at home through a programme of educational and social uplift that also produced literate Newari women, such as Laxminani Tuladhar (1898-1978). Yet the consequence of importing this Ceylonese-derived version of Buddhism was the replacement of Nepal's own ancestral Tibetan Buddhism with a reformed version of Theravada Buddhism that owed not a little to Russo-American Theosophy. This was only one chapter in the longer transimperial tale of Theosophy as it made its way from the great Atlantic port of New York to British India, imperial Russia, French Indochina, and beyond (Krämer and Strube 2020). Like other occult new religions of the age of modern empires, through their journeys across empires, Theosophical thinkers developed modes of religious commensurability that, in theory, and also sometimes in social practice, proposed radical equality among their Asian, American, and European adherents. To propagate these new modes of religious commensurability among these diverse followers, the various outposts of the Theosophical Society became involved in many translation and publication projects that blended a medley of religious doctrines from different corners of Asia, Europe, and North America.

Turning to Southeast Asia, the city of Chiang Mai and its surrounding highlands became a transimperial borderland between the Rattanakosin Empire of Siam, the British in Burma, and the French in Indo-China, with the expanding US empire in the Pacific also playing a role in the transformation of Chiang Mai (Easum 2023). As a result, the previously independent and substantially rebuilt city also saw extensive changes to its religious character. The Bangkok-based Rattanakosin state sought 'to integrate Chiang Mai by undermining the sacro-spatial foundations of the Chiang Mai kings' (Easum 2023, 221), while promoting a reformist Theravada Buddhism that was alien to the traditions of the highlands, which had more in common with the Buddhism of Burma. In different ways, the rise of British-ruled Rangoon, the arrival of overseas Chinese merchants, and the efforts of the American Presbyterian Mission also contributed to Chiang Mai's 'sacro-spatial' transformation that also involved changes in the rituals performed at new or renovated temples. Yet this intensification of external input into the region provoked local religious responses in turn. These were spearheaded by the charismatic monk Khruba Siwichai (1878-1939), who gathered funds to oversee the construction of no fewer than thirty-three new religious institutions in Chiang Mai (Easum 2023, 232).

Other transimperial religious borderlands lay deep in Central Eurasia, where Muslim Tatars turned Russian imperial communicational infrastructures towards their own ends. In the early 1800s, Tatar religious actors were the first Muslims outside China to adopt printing, basing themselves in the old Tatar khanate (and by then Russian imperial city) of Kazan. From there, they distributed the many books and journals they printed in simplified Turkish to educate and uplift their fellow Turkic Muslims across the southeastern border in the Qing imperial province of Xinjiang by spreading reformist religious ideas (Papas 2017). Meanwhile, across the Russian empire's southwestern border, the Crimean

Tatar reformist Ismail bey Gasprinsky (1851-1914) used his linguistically simplified ‘pan-Turkic’ newspaper *Tercüman* (‘The Interpreter’, published 1883-1918) to spread his ‘*usul al-jadid*’ (‘new method’) teachings to the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Balkans, where in the early 1900s, Gasprinsky also made a lecture tour of Bulgaria and Romania (Turan and Evered 2005). Other Jadid reformists, such as Munawwar Qari Abdurrashidkhanoglu (c.1878-1931) were based in Tashkent, by then capital of Russian Turkestan, whence their influence reached across the southern border to the Turkic communities of northern Afghanistan and Chinese Xinjiang. Tibet, Nepal, the little kingdoms of the Karakorum, and Mongolia also functioned as borderlands between adjacent empires through which religious actors moved on from railheads via animal transport.

Yet not all such borderlands were landlocked, nor for that matter in Eurasia. The islands of the Pacific are a case in point. Other transimperial religious borderlands emerged in the Philippines and Hawaii as they became part of American’s Pacific empire. In 1913, the Ottoman caliph dispatched the Palestinian Shaykh Wajih al-Kilani (1883-1916) to the US Philippines as a religious instructor for the Moros (Clarence-Smith 2013, 2015, 2017). Thirteen years later, Muhammad Abd al-Alim Siddiqi (1892–1954), the Indian missionary founder of the Singapore-based All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society, established the Muslim Association of the Philippines.

Turning to Hawaii, as state and private actors from imperial Japan sought to reclaim the labour diaspora that had first arrived there in 1885, the Hawaiian archipelago became a borderland of transimperial religious competition between Japanese Buddhist and American Christian organizations. By the early 1900s, Japanese Buddhist organizations were also being established among labour diasporas in Brazil and Peru, with Jodoshu and Sotoshu missionaries reaching Lima as early as 1903 (Gardiner 1975). But the Japanese imperial promotion of Shinto over Buddhism would also contribute to the establishment of Shinto shrines not only in the colonies of Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria but also in Hawaii, where from 1906 a series of shrines were founded by such organizations as the Izumo Taishakyo Mission. The Hindu reformist groups were also active overseas, particularly the Arya Samaj, founded in Bombay in 1875, which from around 1900 began its outreach among people they identified as fellow if unenlightened Hindus among the South Asian labour and trade diasporas in Zanzibar, Fiji, then later in Trinidad and Bali.

However, borderlands are complex social environments, and these new religious institutions founded for diaspora communities also sometimes served as spaces for religious exchange. A case in point is Revd. Julius Goldwater (1908-2001), another Jewish American convert to Buddhism. Of Russian and German Jewish descent, Goldwater first encountered Buddhism among the Japanese of Hawaii where, by the 1920s, Honolulu’s Honpa Hongwanji Temple was offering services and classes in English. A decade later, he sailed to Japan to be ordained as a Jodo Shinshu priest before returning across the Pacific to become a leading figure at the Nishi Hongwanji temple in Los Angeles. When, in 1941, the competing Pacific empires of the United States and Japan went to war, Goldwater served as a Buddhist minister to the thousands of Japanese-Americans interned in camps far away from the strategic borderlands of the coast. Yet, internment camps were sites of Buddhist activity. For eight decades of interaction between the nascent empires of the United States and Japan meant that camps such as Manzanar in the high desert of California hosted both a Christian and a Buddhist ‘church’.

In such ways, we again see how a wide variety of geographically disparate borderlands between empires underwent comparable transformations by way of religious pluralization, material-spatial reconfiguration, translation and publication. Borderlands that experienced the most intense input from transimperial religious actors and organizations, in turn, became spaces for cumulative cycles of religious adaptation to their new social and physical environments in analogous ways to port cities, rail towns, and reinvigorated pilgrimage sites.

Conclusions

In their position paper on the potential insights of a transimperial methodology, Hedinger and Heé argued that the ‘question at stake is how a transimperial approach can challenge common notions of imperial space’, thus allowing us to ‘see how lines are drawn among empires and that they do not follow binary routes, be these centre-centre, centre-periphery or periphery-periphery patterns’ (Hedinger and Heé 2018, 445). In response to this call, the previous sections have tried to map the emergence of new religious geographies in the in-between spaces of empires, whether Asian, African, American, or European. In some cases, these spaces consisted of new towns—port cities and rail hubs—that were part of the infrastructural fabric of empire-based globalization. In other cases, they were pilgrimage sites of much older provenance that were reshaped—demographically, architecturally, and ritually—through their integration into intra- then inter-imperial networks. Meanwhile, previously isolated regions, whether continental interiors or islands, experienced rapid religious change by becoming borderlands between different empires.

One general pattern here was religious pluralization as these varied spaces became homes to alternative versions of familiar religions; to previously unfamiliar religions; or to entirely new religions, such as Theosophy and Baha’ism. Another general pattern was that these spaces were often markedly and enduringly transformed in material terms: to day the stone, brick and concrete churches, mosques, temples and shrines constructed from Yokohama, Seoul, and Harbin to Zanzibar, Hawaii, and Los Angeles constitute some of the oldest and most visible buildings across this transimperial global geography. A third general pattern that accompanied this material-spatial reconfiguration is found with the printed books and journals through which religious teachings were in both senses of the term ‘translated’—simultaneously rendered into different languages and relocated to new spaces—so as to reach new communities of believers. The intensified combination of these factors in at least some transimperial religious spaces led to the final general pattern that this article has termed accumulative acculturation. Here, not only teachings and languages but also ritual and organizational forms along with architectural styles were repeatedly modified to adapt to one imperial environment and then another as religious actors and organizations, ideas and models, moved *within between* empires as part of the two tiers of movement captured in the concept of the ‘transimperial’. Technology and infrastructure were key contributors here, by way of transportation and photography the film that allowed distant religious spaces to be visualized that emulated from afar.

As we have seen, these shared patterns were visible across what remained quite distinct types of environments, from bustling new steam ports and rail towns to ancient

pilgrimage centres, small islands and remote inland settlements. A transimperial mode of analysis has enabled us to see these larger common patterns amid such apparent geographical diversity and distance. By the same token, a transimperial approach to the history of religion between around 1870 and 1940 shows how conjoined intra- then inter-imperial religious transformations paved the way for the globalized forms of religiosity of the later 20th and early 21st century.

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