

“Religious diversity in trade cities from a sociological perspective”

This essay examines the extent to which trade may facilitate religious tolerance in multicultural urban centers. By dissecting religion as a social construct, the analysis highlights its dual role in fostering both cohesion and division. To better tackle the complexity of inter-religious interactions, the work delves into the way in which socialization processes contribute to belief systems and societal dynamics. In addition, sociological theories and an historical analysis are supported by several instances and real-life examples.

Notably, the Singaporean case study demonstrates how strategic trade positioning fosters pluralistic beliefs and religious harmony. Overall, this study concludes that religious tolerance in trade cities emerges not solely from ideology but from constant exposure to cultural diversity and institutional support. Critical is the role of early socialization and education in cultivating tolerance, advocating for adaptive frameworks in an increasingly interconnected world.

We propose to examine the relationship between trade and religion tolerance by first delving into the sociological aspect of religion and focusing on the peculiarity of inter-religious interaction. Next, we analyze the impact of trade, considering various typologies and cultural implications. Finally, we present a case study on Singapore to support our argument.

1. Religion

We first approach the concept of religion as a social phenomenon, mitigating the intrinsic subjective character of faith via a factual consideration and social theory.

1.1 Sociological Faith

Religion is an essential social institution that is able to generate both cohesion and division in societies. On one hand, it fosters social cohesion by uniting individuals through a common set of values and beliefs. In his ‘The Elementary Forms of Religious Life’ (1912), Émile Durkheim recognizes the importance of the communal element of religion, which consequently becomes a source of social solidarity. On the other hand, religion constitutes a helpful instrument to handle uncertainty and disparities in society, further reinforcing the status quo and social inequalities. Commonly defined as “*the opium of people*”, Karl Marx portrays faith as another critical source of alienation that prevents people from uprising. This innate duality determines the conflictual character that is often associated with inter-religious engagement.

1.2 The peculiarity of inter-religious interactions

But what causes religious disputes to be so controversial? First of all, religion is a fundamental agent of socialization as it is tightly connected to individuals’ upbringing and familiar inclinations. Per definition, agents of socialization influence the integral perception that someone has of reality. Children are socialized into certain beliefs (including religious faith) that will inevitably shape their behavior and persona. The extent of radicalism of such beliefs is something to take into consideration as well. Secondly, religion has always been (and continues to do so) an universal and pervasive institution, whose influence extends to other social spheres. For centuries wars have been conducted in the name of religion, territories claimed, scientific discoveries rejected. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize the role played by religious beliefs in generally conditioning conduct, an idea thoroughly analyzed by Max Weber in his work ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’. And lastly, religion is often regarded as existing beyond the bounds of time; considering that the beliefs upon which faith is constructed are eternal, they continue to be true independently and in spite of time passing. However, this entails a lack of consideration of the given context, resulting in general inflexibility. Due to their

elevated content, religious stances are very difficult to deal with as they cannot be contradicted. In this perspective, inter-religious engagement is likely to be conflictual, since what is considered right or wrong might not overlap. But it is important to bear in mind that faith is a choice and we are the one associating value to certain beliefs.

1.3 Impartial Sociological Theory

As per the symbolic interaction perspective, the symbol through which the individuals grasp social realities play this role as long as the individuals in the first place recognized them as such. Hence, we can refer to the following definition of religion:

“Sociologists define religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing and supernatural” (Max Weber).

Pivotal is the introduction of the concept of creating the sacred. It shifts the focus back to man and it grants for a rational understanding of religion as a social phenomenon, more than as a celestial plan carried out by men. The decisional component does not have to lessen the value of the thing, but it significantly enhances its subjectivity. It allows for religious plurality. And what it is essential to bear in mind is that coexistence is a possibility and this is not a zero-sum game.

2. Trade Cities

We now consider the peculiar environment of major trade cities and see how what we covered until now can be applied there. Cities have always been a locus of encounter and exchange. In some cases, their geographical position and economic activities have transformed them into commercial cross-roads, where eclecticism thrives.

2.1 Foreign influxes

The heterogeneity and density of cultural trends within the urban context serve as catalysts for cultural interaction and merge. This is further enriched by the most varied influences introduced through trading activities. An example of cross-cultural contact can be found in the Western and Chinese impact on elements of Japanese paintings dating back to the eighteenth century. Following a period of isolation (Sakoku, 1639-1853), the volume of trade in Japan significantly increased. The port town of Nagasaki quickly rose as it became the main door to both China and Europe, after the Dutch East India Company established a trading post. Not only good arrived through the trading activities. There is evidence of foreign influences that gave birth to some new trends among the local artists (Fig.1).



Figure 1. Kawamura Jakushi Budai inscription (Nagasaki National Museum)

2.2 The relevance of trade

Overall, we recognize the monumental implications of trade, no matter the modality: trade via sea and trade via land. If the former gave rise to colossal port cities, the latter developed around the main trading routes. The prime example is probably the Silk Road, along which merchants became core conduits of cultural diffusion.

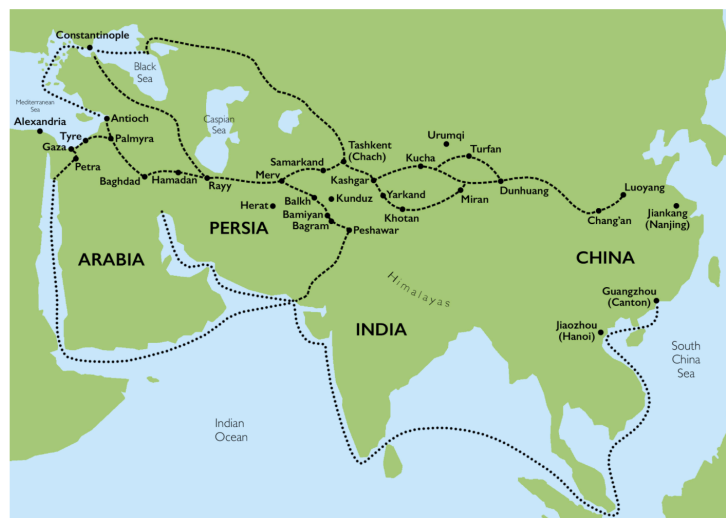


Figure 2. Detailed map of the Silk Roads

This complex network of trade routes connected cities and people across the entire Asian continent (Fig.2), transporting exotic and luxurious cargo. Among many goods, it is vital to mention that trade considerably contributed to the diffusion of ideas and religions. Here follow the most emblematic cases.

2.2.1 The diffusion of Buddhism in China

Buddhism spread via the Silk Roads and it was introduced in China under the Han dynasty. Devotional images of *bodhisattvas* and gigantic Buddhas carved in the stone are still visible as testimony of this process. The Kizil Thousand Buddha Caves are

believed to be the earliest Buddha cave complex in China and they are situated in the far western region of Xinjiang Uyghur. Another important site is the Mogao Grottoes situated near Dunhuang, at a strategic cross-road along the Silk Road and further east (as to show the expansion of the religion). These monuments represent a physical landmark of cultural diffusion and exchanges which are reflected in the social plurality of such regions.

2.2.2 The diffusion of Buddhism and Islam in SouthEast Asia

Research suggests that a similar phenomenon occurred in South East Asia. Many items with Buddhist features were found in the region, such as wooden images of Buddha found in the Mekong Delta or Dīpankara Buddha in East Java. However, this process was mitigated by the concurrent spreading of Islam in these territories. Allegedly, muslim traders started to be interested in the rare spices present in the region. This resulted in a notable increase in commercial interactions, which led some of the Arab merchants to settle in the region. The most striking example is Indonesia. The establishment of Arab trading posts in Sumatra Island determined the inclusion of these territories in the trading routes. Islam spread considerably, to the point that the members of the royal families converted as well. There is evidence of funeral tombstones of Indonesian kings engraved using the Islamic calendar (Fig.3).



Figure 3. Grave of Sultan Malik Al Saleh

2.3 Colonialism as exchange propeller

Another phenomenon to mention is definitely colonialism. The European empires expanded their authority over external territories with the purpose of exploiting their

people and resources. Sadly, the legacy of colonial relationships can still be reflected in unequal trade partnerships, where former colonies are still economically dependent on their colonizers. Overall, a significant number of colonial undertakings had the ultimate goal of assuring control over trade routes and resources. In exchange, the Europeans established their customs and institutions and it escalated into cultural imperialism, leading to the supplantation of local customs. Nevertheless, trade flourished and, in some cases, it also allowed for significant cultural interactions and hybridization.

2.3.1 The Dutch administration in the colonies

Let us consider the case of the Dutch East Indies in the South East Asia region. While the Dutch did contribute to the diffusion of Christianity, their colonial ambitions had to face the Islamic diffusion that was occurring in the area. Today, Indonesia is the country with the single largest population of Muslims (13% of the world's total Muslims). And yet, the southern provinces have a Christian majority (Fig.4) .

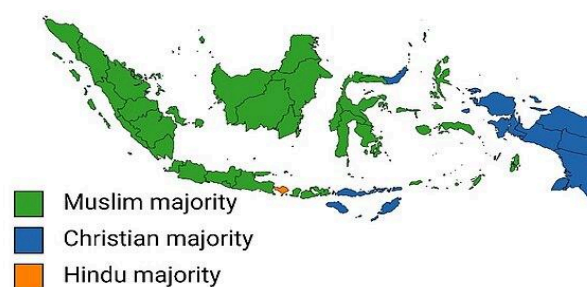


Figure 4. Religions in the Indonesian provinces

This is a consequence of the Dutch colonial policies: the Dutch did export Christianity, but they “favored coexistence over religious wars” (Franklin and John N., 2020)

3. Tolerance considerations

To sum up, any typology of trade fostered cultural exchanges that would later thrive under globalization. Major trading posts quickly became vibrant melting pots as merchants brought with them not only goods, but also customs and ideas. In such a dynamic and heterogeneous framework, the need for plurality arose. What determines such conditions?

3.1 Evidence from India

Trade cities have historically shown evidence of religious tolerance due to the frequent interactions. Research conducted by Stanford University (Jha, 2008) shows that medieval trading ports in India were significantly less likely to experience religious riots. This was due to the foreign influx that characterized these cities as a

product of their involvement in Indian Ocean trade. Through sociological lenses, the people living in these cities were socialized into a context of multiculturalism. It is likely that their agents of socialization accounted for such a liberal environment. This is reflected in the evidence showing that these ports developed institutional mechanisms that supported interreligious exchange, which set the foundations for future religious tolerance. Is this sufficient to master tolerance?

3.2 The Singaporean case study

We propose a case study on the city of Singapore. Born as a colonial trading post, Singapore enjoys a strategic geographical position on the Singapore Strait and the South East Asia region that granted it the title of “anchor for trade” (FT Commercial Department). This claim is also confirmed by the data since in 2023 the trade to GDP ratio was equal to 311%. The enlightened relationship between trade and tolerance holds as well, as shown by the Pew Research Center in their study.

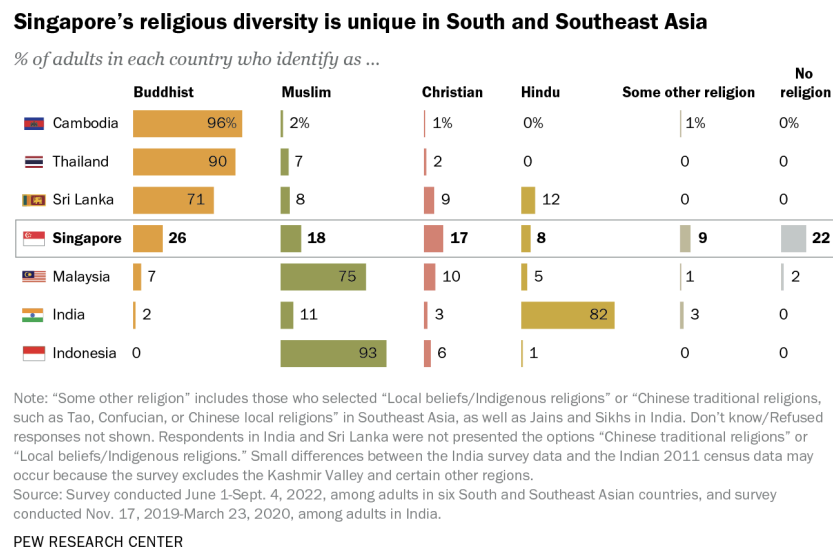


Figure 5. Religious diversity in Singapore

Followers of all faiths tend to be pluralistic in their beliefs (Fig.5) and broadly tolerant towards other religions. It is worth reporting that Singaporeans do not associate one specific faith as more important for being “truly Singaporean” (Miner, 2023). Hence, we can conclude that it may not be only a matter based on religious beliefs.

4. Conclusion

We can safely conclude that trade cities facilitated networks of social exchange across religious lines. As demonstrated by the urban question, the cities are more about population than buildings and they enhance opportunities for social interactions. This mechanism is even bolstered in trade cities, due to the varied influx associated with

their commercial activities. The heterogeneity and the dynamism of such context requires tolerance or it would otherwise escalate into a civil conflict. Tolerance is difficult to grow ex novo, but people can be socialized into it in their early childhood. Considering that it is not possible to only rely on the families for such an important task, the education system should fill in the voids. This topic is extremely relevant, even more today, when we move towards a fluid and polarized reality.

If we agree with the sociological interpretation that religion is a response to latent anxieties, then there should not be a problem in reacting differently to the same problem. Each “solution” holds validity for the individual believing in it and it should not affect anyone other than that specific individual. Actually, realizing that we are all looking for solutions to the same problem could potentially offer the opportunity to join forces and collaborate, leading to hybridization. What really matters is that it is not a zero-sum game and no one loses in choosing the road that fits them the best.

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