

UNIT 1: The Global Tapestry (c. 1200 – c. 1450)

Evaluate the extent to which religious responses to wealth accumulation in Eurasia in the period circa 600 B.C.E. to 1500 C.E. differed from state responses to wealth accumulation.

From the period of 600 B.C.E to 1500 C.E. empires and civilizations expanded in their size and complexity. At the same time advances in technology and changes to the environment opened up new trade routes that linked previously isolated regions of Afro-Eurasia. The specific routes of the Silk Road, Sub-Saharan Sand Roads, and Indian-Ocean trade networks moved valuable resources and people, linking them in a transregional network that fostered not only the accumulation of wealth, but the spread of cultural ideologies and eventual political competition. Yet within this economic change, religions and governments needed to respond in order to take advantage of the current economic opportunities in front of them. Similarly, religion and states desired the accumulation of increased wealth by 1500 C.E. yet both differed in their response to economic gains that emerged in the post-classical era. Ultimately religions encourage their members to redistribute wealth and live a life of charity in return for salvation, whereas states took on a greater role in regulating and controlling trade through state sponsored bureaucracies. Therefore, both religions and governments benefited from the expanded trade of the post-classical era as they built support for and financial backing of their particular organizations.

Religions often rejected wealth and encouraged charity to obtain salvation, but they also looked to partner with merchants for similar goals of building up the church. A Christian Monk describes in a biography of Saint Melania and her husband who gave up their wealth and property for a “heavenly purpose” (Doc. 2) While the author might exaggerate this story of Saint Melania, such as the description of their massive estate, in order to encourage greater devotion from others it does reveal a depth of selflessness in given up her wealth. This shows the extreme sacrifice of this particular saint. From the Islamic sacred text, the Qur’an, similar acts of religious charity are encouraged. Noting that both Christianity and Islam were consider “People of the Book” because of their shared

origins and traditions, the idea of Satan “threatening” people might be further encouragement to live a less greedy life on earthy. (Doc. 3) By offering salvation or a blessed after life, the Qur’an is hoping to encourage both followers of Islam and non-believing converts to act with charity in order to achieve a spot in heaven or religious blessings. While Christianity and Islam both stressed acts of charity, their pursuits of power and influence came to a head by 1095 when the First Crusades were called by Pope Urban II who saw the rise of Islam in the Middle East as a threat to his religion. The resulting migration of Europeans called to the Crusades brought back greater interest in trade that would develop in the coming centuries and would help to fill the financial support of the Catholic Church who brought back riches gained in military battles. Yet, not all religious pursuits pushed charity. A Buddhist painting that shows numerous merchants who are offering up gifts to the Buddha. This reveals a mutual relationship between traders and the religion who both benefit from this practice of money being donated to the church and the merchants gaining blessing over their economic activity. (Doc. 4) Religious artwork like the one seen here, was often completed to promote the power, wealth, and positive view of the leaders who commissioned them.

States created greater economic regulations through an expanding government or bureaucracy that hoped to promote and protect trade. In an economic and political treaty within the Mauryan government in India a bureaucracy was created under the “Superintendent of Commerce whose job will be to control production and trade with the purpose of maintaining economic equality. (Doc 1) The advisor to the Mauryan emperor likely wanted to help establish a strong relationship between the new government and the growing merchant class. This would allow for trade profits to flow into the government while the empire maintains safety and security of exchange. Later in the same region of the work a ruling edict from the Kataka state in India established a new taxation system by the government in return for providing traveling merchants safety and security within their port cities. (Doc 5) By noting past injustices in which prior kings took advantage of and basically robbed the merchants, the new ruler is attempting to establish their merciful and benevolent leadership. Similarly, in East Asia, the Song Dynasty in China from 960 to 1279 saw a period known as the “Golden Age” where trade expanded. The Song government was

known for not only supporting trade through innovative practices like flying money (aka credit) and establishing banks to support trade, but also expanded the expertise of their government through the Exam System which created a meritocracy in China where the brightest minds in Confucianism got government jobs. All in all, state governments expanded their power and sponsored the development of trade.

In the end both religion and government hoped to benefit through the expansion of trade, by building a stronger following, financially supporting their specific interests, yet governments were more proactive in directly cashing in on greater trade whereas religions hoped to make the selfless act of charity a moral good for their beliefs. By 1450, with the emergence of the Age of Exploration, trade would move beyond the Afro-Eurasia continents into a proto-globalization that linked the Old World with the new. Similarly, religious would see an opportunity as missionaries set out around the globe looking to convert native popular ions. Just as strong nation-states built their transoceanic empires by expanding trade though greater regulation of transportation and the accumulation of resources and valuable goods around the world. While initially pursuits of the post-classical era were limited and, in their infancy, they sparked minimal conflict between both sides, yet from 1450 – 1750 greater competition over dwindling land and resources would cause more conflict and competition between both world religions and growing empires.