

The Possible Indirect Influence of Buddhism on Christian Monasticism: an Assortment of Facts in Support of the Hypothesis

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At a Glance

Avenue of Influence #1. *Emperor Asoka of India sent Buddhist monk-missionaries to Egypt, the birthplace of Christian monasticism, in the 3rd century BCE, and also to Greece, to convert the world to the Dharma. There is also evidence that a number of Buddhists were living in Alexandria sometime between 300 BCE and 100 CE, and this was a large site of Therapeutae.*

Avenue of Influence #2. *Greek kingdoms existed in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, which were lands that Buddhism was the dominant religion. This formed a unique syncretic culture of Greco-Buddhism. There were important Greek converts to Buddhism. Greek rulers promoted Buddhism in the Indo-Greek Empire. Christianity existed in India from at least the 2nd century.*

Avenue of Influence #3. *Christianity and Buddhism co-existed as dominant religions in Syria: the Sasanian (Persian) Empire. Christian monasticism flourished more in this region than anywhere else besides Egypt. This region adopted the most extreme forms of monastic asceticism in the Christian world. Their asceticism demands influence beyond Christianity.*

Avenue of Influence #4. *Gnosticism has elements, which were prevalent in the Egyptian church, that have ultimate origins in Indian spirituality. The influence of Buddhism on Gnosticism is an absolute fact in the case of the Buddhist-Christian hybrid religion of Manichaeism, which started in the Sasanian (Persian) Empire in the third century, and rapidly became a popular religion there, and spread throughout the Roman Empire and was a major threat to the orthodox Church, and then came to Egypt directly before Christian monasticism was first practiced. Manichaeism adopted some elements of monasticism from Buddhism.*

Avenue of Influence #5. *Greek spiritual philosophy, which provided the theoretical basis for the asceticism and mysticism of Christian monasticism, was heavily influenced by contact with India. There was Indian influence on Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Pyrrhonism (Skepticism), and even Cynicism and Stoicism. But definite influence of Buddhism occurred in Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was the philosophy of the Church Fathers who promoted monasticism.*

Avenue of Influence #6. *There was religious cultural exchange between Egypt and India for millennia according to numerable scholars, and especially in late antiquity via the Silk Road, which passed through Alexandria, the capital city of Egypt, from Central Asia and India.*

There was no such thing as separate compartments of the world (Greco-Roman, Persian, and Indian), as is often supposed, but rather these parts of the world were in constant connection.

Why Look for Outside Influence?

These Christian monastic elements are entirely foreign to the pre-monastic Christian religion:

- The concept of going forth from the world into solitary homeless life in the wilderness. (The Greek word for monasticism, "monachos," even means to dwell alone.) In both earliest Buddhism (this continued for some monks in the first centuries of the Common Era) and earliest Christian monasticism the monks were supposed to live solitary homeless lives in the wilderness, "dwelling alone," and only came together sometimes for spiritual meetings.
- Monasticism is a permanent and irreversible commitment. A monk must never look back, and if one goes back to live in the world then one has committed "apostasy" (from monasticism), and is treated as an apostate by the monastic community. There is even the concept that one who departs from monasticism has "forfeited salvation" (in some undefined sense).
- Monasticism was regarded as practically essential for spiritual perfection.
- Taking solemn vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience.
- The concept of monastic *ordination* (ordination into the institution of monasticism)
- The monastic rules are basically a Christian version of the Buddhist Vinaya: same spirit.
- The Greco-Indian philosophical spirituality (see the section on philosophy for explanation)
- Indian-style meditation
- Highly esoteric soteriology
- Spiritual/philosophical paradigm: essence of spiritual practice is metaphysical purification.
- The concept of the spiritual master.
- Very specific religious robe uniform, uniformity in external elements, etc.
- Having no possessions whatsoever beyond what is necessary to survive.
- Eating as little food as possible every day, only for survival.
- The practice of silence.
- Sometimes extreme forms of asceticism: not speaking for extended periods of time, never laying down to sleep, plunging oneself in ice cold water, etc.
- The division between monks (who completely follow the teachings of Christ) and the laity.
- The Eastern church very quickly became a "monastic church" that saw monasticism as its heart, and chose its bishops from monks, and bishops continued to practice monasticism.
- The option for cenobitical or eremitical monasticism with eremiticism as the higher form.
- The ritualized confession of faults before the monastic community.
- Prayer mantra based on a scripture verse.
- Monastic tonsure, i.e. cutting the hair as an essential ritual of monastic ordination.

The list could go on. But one needs to read the Desert Fathers, the Institutes and Conferences of John Cassian, and Evagrius in order to get the point.

Evagrius (345-399), the systematizer of Egyptian monastic spirituality, basically espoused a kind of Christianized crypto-Buddhism.

All of this could have been invented out of nowhere, yes. But we should first look for influences.

Why look to Buddhism as an Influence?

1. There are many similarities between the monastic spiritualities of Christianity and Buddhism. (see the elements of Christian monasticism that are listed above.)
2. Buddhism was the most populous monastic religion in the world from the 3rd century BCE up to the time of Christian monasticism in the 3rd-4th centuries CE. It was even more popular than Hinduism during that time in India.
3. In the 3rd-4th centuries CE, the institution of monasticism only existed in the dharmic religions: Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika-ism, and Brahmanism (Hinduism). Of these, Buddhism was the only missionary religion, and it is in fact the world's first missionary religion known to history. (Christianity was the only other missionary religion at that time.) Jainism never existed outside of India (the extreme asceticism of Jain monks was not compatible with long distance travel), Hinduism spread by osmosis to parts of Southeast Asia but it has never had any concept of evangelization (this has been blamed on the caste system), and there is no record that Ajivikas were inclined to evangelism or that they existed outside of South Asia.
4. Buddhist missionary monks were sent to Egypt, Greece, and Syria by Emperor Asoka to convert the world to dharma practice, and he solemnly declared their conversion to dharma
5. Christianity co-existed with Buddhism in the Persian Empire and India for centuries.
6. Christian monastic spirituality was influenced by Neo-Platonism which in turn was influenced by Buddhism.

The Buddha intended for monks to be missionaries:

"Go forth, bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, for the good, for the happiness of gods and men. Let not two go by one way. Preach the doctrine that is beautiful in its beginning, beautiful in its middle, and beautiful in its ending. Declare the holy life in its purity, completely both in the spirit and the letter." (a famous passage, found in Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka)

(This was the spirit of early Buddhism but, after it became the popular religion throughout Asia, this evangelical spirit waned over the centuries and has now almost disappeared from the religion.)

There is another instance in which a religion was influenced by Buddhism to undertake monasticism: Taoism. This is a case in point. (But in the case of Christianity the influence may not have been as direct.)

Buddhism and Christianity should not be seen as so incompatible that they could not have influenced each other due to the fact that one is based on God and that one is not. In fact, Mahayana Buddhism was theistic-oriented (the divine "Absolute," sought grace from deities, and practiced worship and prayer), and on the other hand, the Gnostic-oriented and Neo-Platonic Christianity of Egypt was, for the first time in Christian history, prepared for a transcendental Indian spirituality.

Preliminary Information

Christian quasi-monasticism existed throughout the Christian world – in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine – from the 3rd century, to some extent in the 2nd century, and perhaps even straight back to the time of Jesus. This consisted in ascetics living outside of towns who practiced voluntary poverty and celibacy. Some of them reportedly wore clothing similar to that of philosophers. But they were involved in their local churches and more or less with the rest of society. So this was not yet full-fledged monasticism, which is characterized by total withdrawal from the world. In Syria there was an order called the “sons and daughters of the covenant” who took lifelong vows of celibacy.

The earliest full-fledged Christian monasticism in historical records began in Egypt in the 3rd century CE (not 4th century as is often stated). Some scholars believe that it started independently in Syria at the same time. Christian monasticism flourished to the highest degree in Egypt and Syria.

Saint Paul (of Thebes) the First Hermit fled alone to the wilderness to escape persecution around 250. He remained there, became the first monk, and died at 113 in 343. Saint Anthony the Great, who is regarded as the first intentional monk who believed monasticism to be a counsel recommended by Jesus Christ, left the world in 270 and practiced monasticism until his death in 356. Both Paul and Anthony lived in Egypt and met each other after Anthony had become a monk.

In the mid-4th century, monasticism was popularized in Egypt by Saint Athanasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, who wrote the *Life* of Saint Anthony. From 305 BCE to 30 BCE Egypt was the power-base of the Ptolemaic Empire, a Greek kingdom that, at its height, spread throughout the Levant (see below). It’s capital was Alexandria. Egypt was thoroughly imbued with Greek culture, including religion. In 30 BCE Egypt was taken over by the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire of course perceived itself as the heir to Greek culture. Egypt remained a Roman province until the 7th century CE.

By the second half of the 4th century, within a couple decades after its popularization in Egypt, monasticism was *extremely* popular in the Levant (the region that has traditionally been referred to as Syria), which encompasses the Eastern Mediterranean, i.e. the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Iraq. Some of this region stretched outside of the Roman Empire into the Sasanian (Persian) Empire. This was the heartland of the Christian world.

Notes: The Desert Fathers spoke Coptic and Greek. The learned language of Egypt was Greek. Greek was the language of the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. In the 4th century there was one “catholic” church that was not yet divided into Monophysitism in Egypt and Nestorianism in Persia.

Buddhism in the Persian Empire in the 5th Century BCE

Buddhism arrived into the First Persian (Achaemenid) Empire –which dominated the modern territories of Iran, Iraq, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and major population centers in Egypt – *within the Buddha’s generation.*

In the traditionally Vedic societies of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan (these lands were parts of the Indus Valley Civilization) which were conquered by Darius I of Persia in the 6th century BCE.

The Buddha's first two lay disciples, Trapusa and Bahalika, were from Afghanistan. According to the Pali Canon, they offered the Buddha his first meal after enlightenment and were his first disciples even before the monastic sangha existed. After the Buddha's death, they received some of his relics and took them back to Afghanistan, where they built the first stupa monument in the world.

Buddhism in the Greek Empire in the 4th Century BCE

Within only one century after the Buddha's death Buddhism was a dominant religion within part of the Greek Empire:

Alexander the Great (356-323) conquered the Achaemenid Empire, further parts of Central Asia, and Northwest India. One of his general-successors, Seleucus, founded the Greek Seleucid Empire, which dominated the Buddhist lands of Afghanistan and Pakistan (parts of Northwest India, but after two years of war, he realized that India could not be won) and infused the local culture with Hellenism. The Seleucid Empire also included the Levant, Mesopotamia, Persia, Central Anatolia, Kuwait, and Turkmenistan, and thus its inhabitants spoke Greek, Aramaic, and old Persian.

In this period there was a wedding of cultures that formed what is known as "Greco-Buddhism" in the regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The influence can be seen in the life-like Hellenic-style sculptures of the Buddha that became popular at that time. This entire culture was later destroyed.

The spiritual philosophy of India was transported to Greece in the 4th century BCE:

The Greek philosophers Pyrrho, Anaxarchus, and Onesicritus were selected by Alexander the Great to accompany him on his Eastward campaigns, and they were in India for one and a half years. This resulted in the transplantation of the spiritual philosophy of Buddhism into Greek philosophy. The Indian influence on Greek philosophy, however, began with Pythagorou in the 6th century BCE.

SEE THE SECTION BELOW ON "THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM ON GREEK PHILOSOPHY."

The Expansion of Buddhism in the 3rd Century BCE

The territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan were conquered by the Mauryan Empire of India but the Greco-Buddhist culture continued.

Emperor Asoka (r. 268-232), an emperor of the Mauryan kingdom, converted to Buddhism (cf. Minor Rock Edict 3 and Minor Pillar Edict 2), made the religion more prominent in India (Hinduism dominated before Asoka's sponsorship of Buddhism), and undertook a life-long mission to spread the Buddha's Dharma to the furthest regions of the world. He built rock and pillar edicts that promoted the Dharma, and these are the earliest surviving writings in India. Some of the edicts were built in Afghanistan and Pakistan. **Two of them are in Greek, and one of these two is**

bilingual in both Greek and Aramaic. More importantly, Asoka sent missionaries, some of which had Greek names, to spread the religion in **Egypt, Greece, Persian and Greek kingdoms of Central and West Asia** and, according to unverifiable traditions, also to East and South East Asia.

Rock Edict 13

This was written early in his reign. It must be recalled that the lands of Afghanistan and Pakistan were no longer under Greek rule but became part of the Indian Mauryan Empire before this time.

“There is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmans and ascetics, are not found... Now it is conquest by Dhamma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest. **And it (conquest by Dhamma) has been won here, on the borders, even six hundred yojanas away, where the Greek king Antiochus rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas, and Alexander rule... Here in the king’s domain amount the Greeks... everywhere people are following the Beloved-of-the-Gods’ instructions in Dhamma. Even where Beloved-of-the-Gods’ envoys have not been, these people too, having heard of the practice of Dhamma and the ordinances and instructions in Dhamma given by Beloved-of-the-Gods, are following and will continue to do so. This conquest has been won everywhere...**”

Ashoka solemnly stated that the Dhamma was accepted in Egypt and Greece. Who could this be in reference to? Perhaps there were full-fledged converts to Buddhism. But given that he uses the word “Dhamma” in an interreligious sense, as is evidenced from other Rock Edicts, this is more likely a reference to successful reception and influence among the philosophers. The reason for this will become clear in the section below on influence on Greek philosophy.

Ptolemy refers to Ptolemy II Philadelphus of EGYPT (r. 309-246).

Proselytizing Buddhist monks were therefore sent to Egypt by the 3rd century BCE.

Ptolemy also sent ambassadors to India. Pliny the Elder writes:

"But [India] has been treated of by several other Greek writers who resided at the courts of Indian kings, such, for instance, as Megasthenes, and by Dionysius, who was sent thither by Philadelphus, expressly for the purpose: all of whom have enlarged upon the power and vast resources of these nations." (Pliny the Elder, "The Natural History", Chap. 21)

Magas of Cyrene refers to a Greek King of Cyrenaica (modern Libya) in **NORTH AFRICA** who was powerful enough to gain independence from Egypt, and was so prominent that his daughter married the first son of Ptolemy II.

In fact, Buddhist tombstones decorated with the eight-spoked wheel have been found in Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, dating from the Ptolemaic period. (See: Tarn, "The Greeks in Bactria and India.)

The Edict also refers to Antiochos II Theos who was an Emperor of the Greek Seleucid Empire (see above) that extended throughout Persia and much of Mesopotamia. Antigonos II Gonatas was a King of Macedonia. Alexander refers to a king of Epirus, a kingdom in Greece, which, for a brief period, was the most powerful Greek kingdom in the world and managed to march against Rome.

Rock Edict 2

Ashoka mentioned that he provided welfare **“where the Greek king Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are the neighbors of Antiochos.”** This refers to Antiochus II Theos who was an Emperor of the Seleucid Empire.

Rock Edict 5

“Now they work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to the Dhamma. **They work among the Greeks,** the Kambojas, the Gandharas, the Rastrikas, the Pitinikas, and other peoples on the western borders. They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dhamma... They are occupied everywhere.”

The Conversion of Greeks to Buddhism in the 2nd century BCE – 1st century CE

The Greco-Bactrian Kingdom invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North India in 180 BCE. This established the Indo-Greek Kingdom until about 10 CE. Buddhism continued to thrive in India

Buddhism was sponsored by Greek Kings in the Indo-Greek Kingdom:

The Greek coinage in this period of India shows the wedding of Indian Buddhist and Greek culture. There are coins that depict 8 different Greek kings (Menander I, Zoilos I, Strato I, Heliokles II, Theophilos, Peukolaos, Menander II) that have the title: “King of the Dharma” written on them. This referred to Buddhism as it was the most popular religion after it was popularized under Asoka. Some of these coins bear the Eight-spoke wheel along with the Greek-style palm or wreath.

Buddhist scriptures record the conversion of the Greek King of the Indo-Greek Kingdom:

The conversion of King Menander I (Pali: Milinda) recorded in a version of the Pali Canon (it is in the Burmese Canon but not in the purer Sri Lankan or Thai Canons) and even ended up in the Chinese Canon. He was supposedly accompanied by 500 Greek guards to a discussion with a monk and then handed over his kingdom to his son so that he could become a monk. He even becomes an Arhat, a fully liberated being, in the account. Buddhist tradition recognizes him as one of the great promoters of Buddhism almost on par with Ashoka and Kanishka. There is a relief at stupa from the 2nd century BCE of a Buddhist Greek king that may be Menander. The conversion of Menander was mentioned by Plutarch.

The Mahavamsa (a famous historical chronicle written in Pali) states that there was a “head monk” named Mahadharmaraksita (“Great Teacher of the Dharma”) who lived in an Indian Greek city named Alexandria and he led a company of 30,000 Buddhist monks on a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka.

Buddhist monks were in the Levant around the time of Jesus:

There oft-repeated account in Greco-Roman history of the Greek monk Zarmanocegas in **Athens, Greece**. The inscription on his grave states that he came from a port city in India called Barygaza. This city was known for facilitation of trade with Arabia and **Egypt**. In **Antioch** (in the Levant, and as a side note, this was less than 300 miles from Palestine) he met a Roman historian named Nicholas of Damascus who ended up recording these events (it is also related by Strabo, Dio Cassius, etc.). Zarmanocegas was part of an embassy, known as the Pandion Embassy, sent by the Indian emperor Pandion (or Porus or Pandya) to Ceasar Augustus sometime between 13 and 22 BCE. The embassy bore a diplomatic letter in Greek. But in Athens, perhaps at the time that Augustus arrived there in 22/21 BCE, Zarmanocegas burned himself alive. The rumor of this event evidently caused quite a stir in the Greco-Roman world. He was a *shramana*, and it can be assumed that he was a Mahayana Buddhist as self-immolation was regarded as a radical ascetical practice by some people in this tradition. Augustus and several Roman historiographers mention an embassy from India that might have been a reference to the group that Zarmanocegas was with.

There are several dedications (offerings of different sorts at stupas) that were made by Greeks. This is known of course from the fact that the names on the dedication engravings are Greek names.

According to Claudius Ptolemy, a Greco-Roman writer in Alexandria, Egypt, there were several Greek cities that were built in India. Archaeological excavations have revealed that Greek temples, Hindu temples, and Buddhist stupas were built alongside each other. This might be the origins of the religious syncretism in which Indian deities come to be worshipped throughout the Western world.

Some scholars have even hypothesized that Greek influence on Buddhism led to the rise of the Mahayana. This is extremely doubtful but it is cited to show how enormous the unification was.

The Expansion of Buddhism in the 2nd + Centuries CE

At the beginning of the first century CE, the Kushans, and tribe from the Greco-Bactrian Empire, invaded Pakistan and Northern India and formed the Kushan Empire which reigned for the next three centuries.

The Kushans were Hellenized to a great extent as they used the Greek alphabet for their language and their religious sculptures seem to depict mythological scenes from ancient Greek religion.

King Kanishka (r. 78-151 CE) of the Kushan Empire is almost on par with Ashoka in his famed promotion of Buddhism. His capital was located in Pakistan and he had regional capitals in Afghanistan and India. Kanishka is responsible for earliest representations of the Buddha on coins, and the inscription, "Boddo," is in Greek. His importance is also seen in that he allegedly convoked the Fourth Buddhist Council (according to a Mahayana tradition). It is from his Greek-influenced Empire that Buddhism spread to China.

There have even been Buddhist manuscripts in Greek that were found in Afghanistan. These are dated to sometime after the 2nd century CE.

The Westernmost expansion of Buddhism as a popular religion was in Iran. Buddhism was also present in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as archeological remains have been discovered there. The expansion of Buddhism into these regions could have occurred as early as the 5th-4th centuries BCE as it was also a popular in Afghanistan in that time, which was part of the same Empire.

The Influence of Buddhism on Greek Spiritual Philosophy

The influence of Indian spiritual philosophy in general will first be examined.

There was a long standing tradition in ancient Greece that Pythagoras (569-475 BCE) went to India and that he learned the Pythagorean Theorem and his spiritual philosophy there. **This means that Pythagoras would have been a contemporary of Buddha (563-483, according to the traditional rendering) in India.** There is no way to know if he had contact with Buddhism. But there is good reason to believe that he did in fact go to India. Pythagoras established a famous monastic order that continued long after his death. The monastic order practiced abstinence, was vegetarian, rejected wine, observed strict silence, held a daily examination of conscience, and engaged in contemplation. Pythagoras had a profound concept of the divine source and emptiness (“void”), believed in transmigration in the “wheel of birth” that humans should try to be released from, and had an Indian mysticism: metaphysical purification, transformation of the soul, merging with the divinity, initiation through a spiritual master, theory of divine sounds, etc. Pythagorean mathematics are present in Indian writings that predate Pythagoras. According to tradition, he said that he derived his philosophy from India.

Plato (420's-348 BCE) was significantly influenced by Pythagoreanism. He believed in unification with the divine source, ascent from the material world back to the transcendent realm of pure form, noetic contemplation as the means, the doctrine of recollection, the defectiveness and illusory nature of the sensible world, the reality of the one and comparative unreality of the many, transmigration through lower or higher life forms (including animals) as punishment or reward based on previous choices that gave rise to the qualities of the soul, and the independence of the soul from the body. Through Pythagoreanism he was indirectly influenced by Indian philosophy.

Socrates (470-399 BCE) was reportedly visited by an Indian philosopher who ended up influencing Plato, according to a Greek tradition. Eusebius of Ceasaria (in 313 CE) stated:

“Plato however, though he perceived that the science of things divine and human was one and the same, was the first to make a distinction, asserting that there was one kind of study concerned with the nature of the universe, and another concerned with human affairs, and a third with dialectic. But he maintained that we could not take a clear view of human affairs, unless the divine were previously discerned: for just as physicians, when treating any parts of the body, attend first to the state of the whole, so the man who is to take a clear view of

things here on earth must first know the nature of the universe; and man, he said, was a part of the world; and good was of two kinds, our own good and that of the whole, and the good of the whole was the more important, because the other was for its sake. Now Aristoxenus the Musician says that **this argument comes from the Indians: for a certain man of that nation fell in with Socrates at Athens, and presently asked him, what he was doing in philosophy: and when he said, that he was studying human life, the Indian laughed at him, and said that no one could comprehend things human, if he were ignorant of things divine.** Whether this, however, is true no one could assert positively: but Plato at all events distinguished the philosophy of the universe, and that of civil polity, and also that of dialectic." (Eusebius of Caesarea, Preparation for the Gospel. 11:3.)

Eusebius proposed that Plato was directly influenced by Indian spiritual philosophy, if this event happened. Could there even be Indian influence on Socrates? Some of his few philosophical principles were that no one does wrong knowingly but only through ignorance, that there is absolute connection between virtue and happiness (virtue is sufficient for happiness), and that all virtue is knowledge. Yet the pre-Socratic philosophers were only interested in cosmology.

The Greek philosopher Democritus (460-370 BCE) is said to have traveled to Egypt, Persia, and India. This may be supported by the fact that his philosophy of atomism, something that would be very hard to arrive at independently, was present in the *shramana* sects: Jain, Ajivaka, Caravaka.

In the 4th century BCE, Greek philosophers Pyrrho, Anaxarchus, and Onesicritus were selected by Alexander the Great to accompany him on his Indian campaign (327-325 BCE). They were in India for one and a half years and studied under the Indian "gymnosophists," or "naked philosophers," which was the term used by the Greeks for Indian monks. This resulted in the influence of the spiritual philosophy of Buddhism on Greek philosophy.

The philosophy of Pyrrho was especially influenced by Indian ascetics. **The Greek biographer of the philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, who wrote *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, himself said that Pyrrho's emphasis on equanimity and detachment from the world (which were two hallmark virtues of Indian asceticism and later Greek philosophy) came from India.** Upon his return from India, Pyrrho lived a poor wandering lifestyle in solitude, that is, he was a renunciate, despite his fame. He believed that one should avoid speculation and statements on the nature of things because their inherent nature cannot be known by the cognitive mind. Instead, one should just accept phenomena as they are and be free from worry so that the mind can be in a state of peace and tranquility, which is also regarded as liberation. Pyrrho also taught a philosophy of emptiness of phenomena and non-dualism. His only two statements that have come down to us are: "Nothing really exists, but human life is governed by convention" and "Nothing is in itself more this than that" (Diogenes Laertius IX.61). This is obvious Indian influence. Also, his non-cognitive approach most likely came from the "unorthodox" Indian sects: Carvaka, Ajivika, Jainism,

and strains of Buddhism. It did not come from Greece because he is regarded as the first of the Sceptics. He founded his own school of philosophy, Pyrrhonism, one of the ancient Greek schools.

Strabo, a Greek geographer, said that Onesicritus (accompanied Alexander to India) learned these ideas in India: "That nothing that happens to a man is bad or good, opinions being merely dreams" and "The best philosophy is that which liberates the mind from pleasure and grief" (Strabo, XV.I.65)

Anaxarchus (accompanied Alexander to India) reportedly "compared existing things to a scene-painting and supposed them to resemble the impressions experienced in sleep or madness." (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 7.88). He had similar to philosophy with Pyrrho on the inability of the cognitive mind to know the inherent nature of things. Anaxarchus emphasized the ascetical virtue of indifference.

It is an undeniable fact that these philosophers who lived in India, one of which founded an important school of classical philosophy, were influenced by their contact with Indian *shramana* monks. This is evident from their doctrines of non-cognitivism and emptiness of phenomena. The three sects of *shramanas* were: Buddhists, Jains, and Ajaivikas. Alexander's campaign remained in Northern India, which was the area that Buddhism was most populous in during the 4th century. Their contact with Buddhism can therefore be presumed.

Knowledge of Indian religion spread throughout the Greek world at this time. Strabo writes:

"Megasthenes (an ambassador sent to India) makes a different division of the philosophers, saying that they are of two kinds, one of which he calls the Brachmanese (Brahmans, i.e. Hindu priests), and the other the Sarmanes (Shramanas, i.e. Buddhists, Jains, Ajaivikas). (Strabo XV.I.58-60).

It must be recalled that numerous *Buddhist monks were in Greece in the third century BCE as they were sent there by Emperor Asoka of India to evangelize the Greeks.* They would have been in Athens. This was of course the birthplace of Greek philosophy. In the 1st century CE there is in fact report of a Buddhist monk who caused a stir in Athens. (See above section.) If one thinks about it... the Greek philosophers and the Buddhist monks, who would have spoken perfect Greek and were "philosophers" in their own right (in the ancient sense of the word), would have almost certainly held discourse with each other. In fact, Buddhism was a highly developed philosophy, and we can imagine that Asoka sent the most learned monks.

Indeed, Emperor Asoka of India solemnly stated in Rock Edict 13 (see above section) that the Dhamma was accepted in Greece. It says that Greece was "conquered" by the Dhamma. Given that he sometimes used the word "Dhamma" in an interreligious sense (for all dharma-based religions but especially for his own religion of Buddhism), as is evidenced from other Rock Edicts, this could be a reference to their successful reception and spiritual influence among the philosophers. There is in fact good reason to believe that this was the case, as will be seen:

In the third century BCE, the interests of Greek philosophy shifted from metaphysical speculations to spirituality, i.e.: how to live. The goal of philosophy (love of wisdom) was now to relieve suffering and attain happiness, and happiness was often thought to be simply

the absence of suffering. Emotional suffering was believed to be caused by delusion. One must become a sage in order to be freed from bondage to delusive thinking that gives rise to suffering. This was achieved through adherence to natural law, rigorous virtue, equanimity, detachment, passionlessness, contentment, self-examination, mindfulness of the present moment, concentration, contemplation, and mental exercises. The philosophers practiced voluntary poverty, wore a distinct “philosopher’s robe,” and sometimes even practiced homelessness.

Where did all of this come from? Well, according to the Greeks, it came from India.

This spiritual paradigm included most of the classical schools. The most popular schools at that time, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism (Pyrrhonism), were mainly interested in the pragmatic spiritual philosophy that was described above. The Platonic Academy and Peripateticism (Aristotelianism) continued to focus on non-practical discourse but, from the outset in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, they also espoused the same classical spiritual philosophy. The difference was one of emphasis. So there was more or less a unanimous spiritual philosophy (a common core) at this time even though there were, of course, differences in theory and application. An exception to this paradigm was the Cyrenaics, the ultra-hedonist school.

For more on the Greek philosophical spirituality see *Philosophy as a Way of Life* by Pierre Hadot.

The influence of Greek philosophy on apostolic and ante-Nicene Christianity is well-known.

The Greek philosopher Apollonius of Tyana (15-100 CE) also reportedly visited India. Two chapters of his biography are devoted to his sojourn in India, but the historicity of the account has, however, been questioned.) Apollonius was a Pythagorean, a wandering ascetic (basically a monk), and a strict vegetarian. He believed that God cannot be influenced by prayer and does not need to be worshipped, but can instead be reached by the pure nous (intellect) via spiritual practice. There are numerous parallels between the lives of Apollonius and Jesus Christ. These parallels led to controversies between non-Christians and Christians in the late antique world. Pagan apologists used these parallels to discredit Christianity. The Neo-Platonist pagans claimed him as an example of a non-Christian saint. The Church Fathers were also engaged in polemic about Apollonius.

The goal of Neo-Platonic philosophy (formed in 3rd century CE) was to bring together all of the wisdom of the ancient world, including that of the Greeks, Indians, Persians, Egyptians, and Jews, into one perennial spirituality. Neo-Platonism was the philosophy of most of the Church Fathers. Most of the Church Fathers also believed that there was a perennial spirituality amongst pagans.

Neo-Platonism had direct connection with India. Scholars believe that Ammonius Saccas (lived from early to mid-third century CE), often regarded as the father of Neo-Platonism, received the name “Saccas” from either the Sakyas surname in India (which was the highly respected surname of Gautama Buddha) or from a region in northern India where his family may have been from. He is reported to have had vast knowledge of Indian spiritual philosophy. **He lived in Alexandria, Egypt.** Porphyry, another founder of Neo-Platonism, stated that Ammonius’ parents were Christians but that he renounced his faith and became a pagan. This was contested by Jerome and Eusebius who

state that he remained a Christian. The Church Fathers believed that Ammonius was a Christian who “held the divine philosophy unshaken and unadulterated.” In any case, he would have had interaction with Christians, and they believed in the philosophical system that he established.

Plotinus (205-270), who studied under Ammonius for eleven years in Alexandria and turned out to be the greatest proponent of Neo-Platonism, had a passion for Indian philosophy/spirituality and a desire to travel to India that, according to Porphyry, came from Ammonius. Porphyry stated of Plotinus that via Ammonius “he became eager to make acquaintance with the Persian philosophical discipline and that prevailing among the Indians.” Plotinus actually set out on a journey to Persia and India but was not able arrive in India.

The similarities of Neo-Platonism with Buddhism are astounding. This is the first Greek school of philosophy that believed in the formal practice of meditation in the full Indian sense. Plotinus believed that through meditative absorption one must get to a state of empty non-perception. He said that the ultimate state of being does not have any cognition. This is taken straight from Buddhism, which, at the time of Plotinus, had been the dominant religion of India for centuries. Hinduism did not believe in the non-cognition of the Absolute. Much of his spiritual metaphysics are the same as in Buddhism in regards to: the purification of the mind (*nous*) is reversion to its original state before consciousness, desire, and will arose through a chain of dependent origination. This is to be achieved through intense asceticism, contemplation (pure awareness, noetic vision, and mental rest), and a meditative absorption that parallels the jhanas (meditative states) of Buddhism.

A description of the jhanas from the universally accepted scriptures (Nikayas/Agamas) of Buddhism will make this clear. In the first four jhanas, the following characteristics are emphasized: there is thought and then thought gradually comes to cessation, bliss or ecstasy arises and then the bliss or ecstasy wanes, and then there is complete equanimity and unification of the mind. The next set of four jhanas (known as the transcendental and formless jhanas) are called: dimension of infinite space, dimension of infinite consciousness, dimension of nothingness, and dimension of neither perception nor imperception. These dimensions are entered sequentially. The ninth and final jhana, in a category all to itself, is called “cessation.” It is stated that in the highest spiritual state there is absolutely no consciousness whatsoever, not even the most sublime consciousness. The Buddhist concept of consciousness, however, is more like cognitive awareness or perception of phenomena. The mind remains in a state of pure non-perceptive awareness (not of phenomena).

Plotinus holds to this meditation paradigm as actual spiritual doctrine in the *Enneads*.

Plotinus developed the concept of ekstasis (translated as “ecstasy”), which means to “stand outside of oneself,” that is experienced in transcendental meditative absorption. It is essentially the experience of “no-self” as in Buddhism. The Nikayan doctrine of anatta (no-self) states that there is no self in the ultimate or absolute nature of things. In the Nikayan paradigm of meditation, the practitioner enters that impersonal ultimate reality through jhana meditation. Plotinus in fact believed in the doctrine that there is no-self in the ultimate or absolute nature of things as he

believed that phenomena do not have ultimate existence and even his concept of “the One” (the Absolute, source) was completely impersonal: no consciousness, no perception, no desire, no will. He believed that sentient beings should return to that original state from which all derived.

These concepts and terms from Neo-Platonic spirituality were wholesale adopted into Christian monastic spirituality (especially through the Alexandrian school in Egypt):

emphasis on: *epistrophe* (return) to the original nature of the pure *nous* (mind), transition from ignorance to *gnosis* (non-conceptual direct knowledge) through divine illumination, intense *askesis* (ascetical training) of the body and mind, *apatheia* (dispassion, detachment, equanimity), *hesychia* (calmness, stillness, quietude) in meditation and prayer, *theoria* (contemplation, noetic vision, mental rest) as the means to access the divine reality, *ecstasis* (standing outside oneself, ecstasy), *henosis* (unification) which became known as *theosis*.

The concept of the immortal soul (not in the Bible) also comes from Greek philosophy.

Almost all of the Post-Nicene Church Fathers, the popularizers of Christian monasticism, were avowed Neo-Platonists.

The influence of Buddhism on Greek philosophy is very important because it pervaded the Christian world. The Egyptian Desert Fathers have numerous elements of Greek spiritual philosophy. Evagrius, the systematizer of Christian monastic philosophy, was thoroughly imbued with it. It is present in many of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and in most of the Post-Nicene Fathers.

See the bibliography for a list of books and articles.

Avenues for the Influence of Greek and Buddhist Spirituality on pre-Christian Judaism

The contact of Buddhism with Abrahamic religion pre-dates Christianity: in Alexandria, Egypt; and Babylon, located in the modern territory of Iraq.

The entire Jewish religion resided in Egypt one thousand years before Buddhism even existed, according to the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible also states that a large portion of Jews moved to Egypt after the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah in 597 BCE. Jews continued to migrate to Egypt during the Ptolemaic period. Also, according to Josephus, when Ptolemy overtook Judea he took 120,000 Jewish captives back with him to Egypt and that they were soon set free. (To put this into perspective, Jesus as an infant, Mary, and Joseph even went to Egypt, according to the Bible, and there is no reason to doubt that his family could have gone back there.) Most of the Jews in Egypt lived in Alexandria. (They were so numerous that they were assigned a separate section of the city for themselves, comprised 2 of the 5 sections that the city was divided into, and were even large enough to revolt against Roman rule. However, most of the Jewish community was destroyed in 115-117 CE during the Jewish revolt.) The Alexandrian form of Judaism was Hellenized and cosmopolitan. There were Buddhists in Alexandria during this period. (See above sections.)

Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE), himself a highly Hellenized Jewish philosopher/theologian/mystic who attempted to combine Platonism with Judaism, tells of a less-than-orthodox Jewish monastic group called the *Therapeutae*. He said that the Therapeutae were found throughout the Greek world, even among the Barbarians, and that they had large monastic centers in Egypt, especially in Alexandria. As in Buddhism, they abandoned private property, practiced celibacy, were under a strict monastic rule, had distinct religious robes, observed silence, engaged in continuous contemplation, were vegetarians, did not drink wine, and monks were regarded as elders not based on age but based on the time that they had been in the monastery.

The origin of the word Therapeutae is uncertain, even to Philo. But it is worth noting that it contains the word "Thera," which is the Pali word for "Elder," and the monks that Asoka sent to Egypt would have been of the Thera branch, which came to be called Theravada (Way of the Elders). The Theras in Alexandria could have inspired a trans-religious monastic ideal or a syncretic Judeo-Buddhist monasticism. This would be in accordance with the ecumenism of Asoka.

Later, Christians believed that this group was a reference to the early Christian monks.

The memory of this group remained in Alexandria, at least in literary form, and so they could have even influenced Christian monasticism.

The monasticism of the Therapeutae could have also influenced the Essenes in Israel. Some of the Essene communities were monasteries and the members were devoted to celibacy and vegetarianism. If Buddhism influenced the Therapeutae, and the Therapeutae influenced the Essenes, and John the Baptist was an Essene, then this would mean that John the Baptist was indirectly influenced by Buddhism. He was the archetypal monk for Christian monasticism.

The Jewish historian Josephus (37-100 CE) stated that the Essenes were "a group which follows a way of life taught to the Greeks by Pythagoras."

The Hebrews in Babylon (the Hebrews were exiled to there in the 7th-6th centuries BCE, and a large population continued to live there for the next millenia, their rabbis even created the famous Babylonian Talmud in 3rd-5th centuries CE) knew about Buddhism as it was a popular religion in the Persian Empire. Babylon is in modern Iraq and the religion of Buddhism flourished in the neighboring territory of Iran in ancient times. Indians were living in ancient Babylon alongside the Hebrews. After 3rd century BCE there is a high probability that most of these Indians were Buddhists.

The influence of Indian spirituality and perhaps even Buddhism (at least via Platonism) on Judaism can be seen in pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism with these elements: salvation through direct non-conceptual knowledge (i.e. enlightenment) of the self and its relation to the divine, the non-self of the conventional person, the oneness of the nous (intellect) with the divine nature, contemplation, suffering as the principle mark of worldly existence, liberation, and transmigration. These elements of Jewish Gnosticism were most likely picked up in Egypt and Babylon. It is reasonable to believe that some of them were carried over into Palestine. It has been proposed that the Pharisees believed in transmigration. Transmigration was an assumed belief in these passages in the New Testament: Matt. 11:14, Matt 16:13-14, Matt. 17:10-13, Luke 9:7-8, Mark 6:14-16, Mark 8:28, Mark

9:13, John 9:2, John 9:34. This is consistent with the later tradition of Orthodox Judaism in which transmigration was a normal accepted belief. Other Indo-Platonic elements can be seen in Philo.

Israel was part of the Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires longer than it was an independent nation.

Judaism in Israel was Hellenized by the time of Jesus. In fact there was a major center of Greek philosophy within one day's walking distance of his hometown. There was not a spacial separation.

Possible Influence of Buddhism on Christianity before Monasticism

There is definite undeniable influence of Essenism on apostolic Christianity: economic communalism, identical meal of the covenant consisting of bread and wine, the cult-like community of holy ones (saints) that far excels the norms of mainstream Judaism, necessity of baptism for entry into the eschatological community, etc. This is important because Essene-influenced practices of the early Christian community were paradigmatic for later Christian monasticism: voluntary poverty (Luke 18:18-30), the renunciation of private property for communalism (Acts 2 and 4), the counsel of celibacy (Matt. 19:11-12), and obedience to the community leaders (Acts 5, a concept found throughout the NT). These passages from the Bible were believed to teach monasticism. Now if Buddhism influenced the Therapeutae, and the Therapeutae influenced the Essenes in Palestine, and the Essenes influenced some elements in apostolic Christianity, and Christian monasticism looked back to those elements of apostolic Christianity for its inspiration to practice monasticism, then this would mean that Christian monasticism was indirectly influenced by Buddhism.

The similarities between the stories of Jesus and Buddha are worth investigating. They are numerous. Reputable scholars used to hypothesize influence until it became unfashionable to do so.

Christianity existed in India as a minority religion since at least the second century CE. Christian tradition states that the apostle Thomas established the religion in India. By that time, Buddhism, which started in Northern India half a millennium before, had already permeated the whole of India.

Eusebius (260-340), in his *Ecclesiastical History*, mentions a Christian philosopher from Alexandria who went to India and then came back to Alexandria as the head of the Alexandrian religious school for Christians, and then states that one of his students was Clement of Alexandria (150-215):

Chapter 10. Panteanus the Philosopher

1. About that time, Pantænus, a man highly distinguished for his learning, had charge of the school of the faithful in Alexandria. A school of sacred learning, which continues to our day, was established there in ancient times, and as we have been informed, was managed by men of great ability and zeal for divine things. Among these it is reported that Pantænus was at that time especially conspicuous, as he had been educated in the philosophical system of those called Stoics. 2. They say that he displayed such zeal for the divine Word, that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations in the East, and **was sent as far as India**. For indeed there were still many evangelists of the Word who sought earnestly to use their inspired zeal, after the examples of the apostles, for the increase and building up of the Divine Word.

3. Pantænus was one of these, and **is said to have gone to India**. It is reported that among persons there who knew of Christ, he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they had preserved till that time.

4. After many good deeds, Pantænus finally became the head of the school at Alexandria, and expounded the treasures of divine doctrine both orally and in writing.

Chapter 11. Clement of Alexandria.

1. At this time Clement, being trained with him in the divine Scriptures at Alexandria, became well known. ...

2. In his Hypotyposes he speaks of Pantænus by name as his teacher. It seems to me that he alludes to the same person also in the first book of his Stromata, when, referring to the more conspicuous of the successors of the apostles whom he had met, he says: ...

4. Of these the one— the Ionian — was in Greece, the other in Magna Græcia; the one of them was from Cœle-Syria, the other from Egypt. **There were others in the East**, one of them an Assyrian, the other a Hebrew in Palestine. But when I met with the last, — in ability truly he was first—having hunted him out in his concealment in Egypt, I found rest. (Ecclesiastical History, Book 5:10-11)

Clement of Alexandria was well-aware of Buddhism. He wrote:

“Thus philosophy, a thing of the highest utility, flourished in antiquity among the barbarians, shedding its light over the nations. And afterwards it came to Greece. First in its ranks were the prophets of the Egyptians; and the Chaldeans among the Assyrians; and the Druids among the Gauls; and the Samanæans among the Bactrians; and the philosophers of the Celts; and the Magi of the Persians, who foretold the Saviour's birth, and came into the land of Judæa guided by a star. The **Indian gymnosophists are also in the number**, and the other barbarian philosophers. **And of these there are two classes, some of them called Sarmanæ;, and others Brahmins. And those of the Sarmanæ; who are called Hylobii neither inhabit cities, nor have roofs over them, but are clothed in the bark of trees, feed on nuts, and drink water in their hands. Like those called Encratites in the present day, they know not marriage nor begetting of children. Some, too, of the Indians obey the precepts of Buddha; whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have raised to divine honours.**” (Stromata 1:15)

The shramanas were the mendicant monks. The two most populous sects of shramanas were Buddhism and Jainism. At the time that Clement wrote shramanas were practically synonymous with Buddhism because it was the main religion in India. Clement mentioned the connection of India with Greek and Egyptian spiritual philosophy. The doctrine of transmigrating souls is cited.

The Gnostic spiritual philosophy of Clement and his renowned teacher Origen (184-254) became the foundation for the entire spirituality of the Egyptian church. It was also the basis of Egyptian monastic spirituality. The Indian influences on the spirituality of the Alexandrian school (at least via Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism) have been described above. More elements include transmigrating souls and apocostasis, i.e. the eventual return of all beings to the divine order.

All of the church fathers knew about Buddhism. Jerome, for example, made the famous analogy of the birth of Jesus with the birth of Buddha.

Buddhist influence was in Palestine during the 1st century CE at the time of Jesus:

The Church Father, Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), relates the following story:

“But Terebinthus, his disciple in this wicked error, inherited his money and books and heresy, and **came to Palestine, and becoming known and condemned in Judæa** he resolved to pass into Persia: but lest he should be recognised there also by his name he changed it and **called himself Buddas**. However, he found adversaries there also in the priests of Mithras: and being confuted in the discussion of many arguments and controversies, and at last hard pressed, he took refuge with a certain widow. Then having gone up on the housetop, and summoned the dæmons of the air, whom the Manichees to this day invoke over their abominable ceremony of the fig, he was smitten of God, and cast down from the housetop, and expired: and so the second beast was cut off.” (Catechetical Lecture 6:22-24)

This occurred sometime in the late 1st or early 2nd centuries CE. The Church Fathers Hippolytus and Epiphanius add that an Alexandrian religious teacher named Scythianus visited India around 50 CE, and then, upon his return, became the teacher of Terebinthus. There is mention of books that came from India. It is also said that Scythianus lived in Palestine, according to one legend, he disputed with the apostles in Jerusalem. These Fathers state that Terebinthus was the teacher of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism. That is in fact the context in which the story is related. The same story is mentioned in *Acta Archelai*, a polemical biography of Mani written by a Christian in the 4th century.

SYNCRETIC BUDDHISM-BASED RELIGION EXISTED THROUGHOUT THE PERSIAN AND ROMAN EMPIRES, INCLUDING EGYPT, IN THE 3RD CENTURY:

Manicheism was a Gnostic hybrid religion based on Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Mani lived in the Sasanid (Persian) Empire in which these three religions were the dominant religions. **He claimed to be a reincarnation of Buddha**, Jesus, and Zoroaster. The Buddhist influence is pervasive but the Christian influences usually receive the most attention when it is studied. The Manichean scriptures relate this on the Death of Mani: “It was a day of pain, and a time of sorrow, when the messenger of light entered death, when he entered **complete Nirvana**.” The connection with Buddhism was known in the Roman Empire in the 4th century as it is mentioned by Marius Victorinus who wrote in *Ad Justinum Manichaeum*.

There are influences of Buddhist monasticism in Manichaeism:

“Buddhist influences were significant in the formation of Mani's religious thought. The transmigration of souls became a Manichaean belief, and the quadripartite structure of the Manichaean community, divided between male and female monks (the "elect") and lay followers (the "hearers") who supported them, appears to be based on that of the Buddhist sangha.” (*Religions of the Silk Road*, Richard Foltz)

More Buddhist features of Manichaeism include the concepts of enlightenment and liberation. A thorough study of the Manichean scriptures needs to be conducted to determine all the influences.

Manichaeism immediately became one of the most popular religions in the Persian Empire in the 3rd century. It also rapidly spread throughout the Roman Empire in the 3rd century. It reached Egypt between 244 and 251. It flourished in a city near Alexandria in 290. This happens to be right when Christian monasticism in Egypt started, within the same decades.

Manichaeism reached Rome in 280 and Manichaean monasteries were in Rome by 312. Manichaeism was in fact one of the dominant cults that Roman and Syriac Christianity had to contend with. The writings of the Church Fathers are filled with anti-Manichaean tracts. In 354 Hilary of Poitiers even wrote that Manichaeanism was a popular religion in southern France. It should be recalled that Saint Augustine was himself a Manichaean in his youth. He talked about its appeal.

The Buddhist influence on some elements of Gnosticism is therefore an established fact.

The influence of Buddhism on Gnosticism was proposed by Edward Conze who is the most important scholar on early Buddhism. Elaine Pagels in her popular book, *Gnostic Gospels*, also hypothesized Buddhist influences on Gnosticism. She called for Buddhist scholars to aid in this research. But it seems that no one has done a thorough study on this topic yet.

The Buddhist features of Gnosticism include: gnosis (direct knowing), enlightenment through realization of one's true nature, the non-self of the conventional person, the oneness of the nous (intellect) with the divine nature, the idea that supreme Being is in fact not involved with phenomena, suffering as the principle mark of worldly existence, transmigration, and liberation.

This is of utmost importance because the Alexandrian church was inclined towards Gnosticism. The Desert Fathers, the earliest monks in Egypt, adhered to Clement of Alexandria's spiritual paradigm.

More on Indian contact with the Roman World

Scholars acknowledge that there were ancient contacts between India and Egypt. This is evidenced from common mythologies. For an enormous collection of quotes from scholars on ancient relations between India and Egypt see:

http://www.hinduwisdom.info/India_and_Egypt.htm

The Silk Road in fact went through Alexandria, Egypt, a port city that was one of the major commercial and intellectual hubs of the ancient world, from Central Asia and India.

The extent of the contact between Asia and the Greco-Roman world via the Silk Road is evident from the fact that Greek rulers had to issue a ban on the silk trade for economic reasons.

For an enormous collection of quotes from scholars on the contact between India and Greece see:

http://www.hinduwisdom.info/India_and_Greece.htm

For more on Indian-Roman relations see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Roman_relations

For more on Roman trade with India see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Roman_trade_and_relations

There is too much information on cultural contacts to document on here.

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