World Civilizations: Essay 2
Essay 1

The 15th century voyages of Zheng He under the Ming dynasty are nothing short of amazing. Between 1405-1433 Zheng He navigated a fleet of very large ships around the globe on seven voyages, navigating places that were once thought to be first observed by European explorers.1 The only reason for stopping further exploration and possible conquest was political turmoil. The implications of these voyages are far reaching, from challenging our views of European maritime knowledge and exploration as well as Chinese exploration, all the way to the possible consequences on world history had the voyages continued. History as we know it, as well as our personal history, would be much different had the voyages been allowed to continue.

It is a widely accepted fact that in the early 15th century China was the world’s greatest naval power and Zheng He was its admiral. We know for a fact that he led a fleet of enormous ships that sailed through the Indian Ocean, reaching the east coast of Africa. A few scholars, such as Gavin Menzies, have made the leap to conclude that Zheng He could have very well continued around the Cape of Good Hope, sailing to places such as the Artic circle and the Americas. In the article “A New Theory Puts Chinese Fleet Ahead of Columbus” Menzies goes on to conclude that the maps that the Europeans used to discover the Americas and sail around the world were based on Zheng’s and the Chinese Nautical maps. “Menzies said the primary evidence for his theory stemmed from his chance discovery that in 1428, the Portuguese had a chart of the world showing Africa,

Australia, South America and various islands in remarkably accurate detail.”

But the Portuguese did not sail to these places until later in the century. If this is true, then the discovery of the Americas by the Europeans was not by chance; they knew where they were going and how to get there. They must have based their maps on the Zheng He’s maps. Although this view is denounced as speculation by most authorities, Menzies makes a compelling case. Which Paul Chiasson, a Canadian architect, backs by claiming that a nation of native peoples known as the Mi’kmaq on the east coast of Canada are descendants of Chinese explorers; offering evidence in the form of archaeological remains, customs, and artwork. Several other advocates of these theories believe that Zheng He also discovered modern day New Zealand in either his sixth or seventh expedition.

Zheng He went on a total of seven voyages between the years 1405-1433 to what the Chinese called the “Western Ocean” which is the Indian Ocean. Zheng brought back many trophies and envoys from many far-reaching empires. Although the last two voyages are believed to have been his farthest, the Ming emperor destroyed the records. Therefore, it is not clear where Zheng sailed during these two voyages. “The traditional view is that he went as far as Persia. But it is now widely accepted that these expeditions went as far as the Mozambique Channel in East Africa, which is based on the ancient Chinese artifacts that have been found there.”

The latest view advanced by Gavin Menzies suggests that Zheng’s fleet traveled to every part of the world. But to this date

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any claims that Zheng traveled past the Cape of Good Hope is speculation, and with the documents of his last two voyages destroyed, it is unlikely that these claims will be proven.

In the 1930’s a stone pillar was discovered in a town in the Fujian province. It held an inscription that described Zheng He’s voyages. The stone pillar described how the emperor of the Ming Dynasty had ordered him to sail the countries beyond the horizon, all the way to the end of the earth to display Chinese power and maritime strength. The pillar contains the names of the countries that Zheng He visited. Altogether Zheng visited thirty nations from Asia to Africa, traveling more than 35,000 miles.⁵ Zheng accomplished these voyages in extremely large ships. In his first voyage in 1405 Zheng set sail with sixty-two large ships, some 600 feet long, larger than any other ships on the seas at that time. The fleet was manned with 27,000 crewmembers, which included navigators, explorers, sailors, doctors, workers, and soldiers.⁶ A Chinese historian described them as: “The ships which sail the Southern Sea are like houses. When their sails are spread they are like great clouds in the sky.”⁷

Despite the success of these voyages, the Chinese government in 1433 ordered the voyages stopped and the ships destroyed. This is due in part to Conservative Confucian mandarins that took over the country and turned the countries views inward as well as the fact that the voyages were determined to be cost inefficient.⁸

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to continue and the Chinese continued to increase their maritime knowledge and conquest, then our history, and the world’s history would be very different. If the Chinese were the first to come into contact with the Native Americans of South America and establish relations, then the conquest of the Conquistadors might not have happened. Since the Chinese were not a Christian based culture they may have been more accepting and understanding of the Native Americans culture. When the Spaniards did arrive and attempt to conquer they may have had to fight against the Chinese as well as the Indians. The same principle applies to the Native Americans of North America as well. If the Chinese established contact with the North American Indians first, then instead of the Europeans discovering North America and laying claim, they may have encountered the Chinese, who would not have tolerated the abuses that the Native Americans suffered at the hands of the Europeans. If the Chinese were successful in fighting the Europeans, then America as we know it would have been very different. Because of this the historical implications increase exponentially, rendering it virtually impossible to determine, with any degree of accuracy, where we would be today.
India is the birthplace of three major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. All three of these religions have many similarities and differences, but there is one underlying commonality, they are all polytheistic. Or to put it more accurately, they are all non-monotheistic. Unlike the major religions that developed in the Middle East, the Indian religions do not worship any single god or deity. There are many reasons for this, and a look into the history and the beliefs of these religions needs to be taken in order to formulate an understanding of why these religions developed into a non-monotheistic framework.

Hinduism is the world’s oldest extant religion, and many of its origins can be traced to the ancient Vedic civilization. It has no single founder; it is more like a conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions. Hinduism has a diverse system of thought with beliefs spanning monotheism, polytheism, panentheism, pantheism, monism, and atheism.  It is sometimes referred to as henotheistic, in that it has devotion to a single god, while accepting the existence of other gods. It can be categorized so broadly because it is based on a vast array of scriptures that were written and compiled over a long period of time. Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include Dharma, karma, Moksha, Samsara, and the caste system. Dharma outlines ethics and codes of conduct, Karma is the belief in action and subsequent action, Samsara is the continuing cycle of being born again, Moksha is the liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and the caste system divides up

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society. The caste system divides up society into five categories, from top to bottom they are: Priests and Teachers, Rulers and Warriors, Merchants and Farmers, Laborers, and untouchables. This division of society, and the belief system that the society held, led to a peaceful society. If a person was very low in the caste system, they did not feel inferior or any need to rebel. With the belief in Karma and Samsara the individual felt that the good deeds that are done during their current life time will be rewarded by being reborn higher up in the caste system for the next life.

Buddhism originated in the 6th century B.C.E. with the birth of Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha Gautama was the son of a king in Kapilavastu. He lived a sheltered life, never seeing old age, sickness, death or poverty. One day he requested to see the city outside his palace. When he witnessed poverty, sickness, old age and death he decided to take up a life as a wandering ascetic. He wandered around for eight years until he found enlightenment. Once he found enlightenment, he spent the rest of his life traveling and teaching others the path to enlightenment as well. Buddhism is not considered to be a religion or a philosophy, but a guide to directly experiencing reality. It offers the path to enlightenment through following its belief system. Its core beliefs are made up of the four noble truths and the eight-fold path. It stresses non-violence, all life is sacred, and that all suffering is the result of desire, therefore to eliminate suffering a person must eliminate desire. Buddhism shares similarities with Hinduism in that it believes in Karma and reincarnation, as well as the fact that an individual can be released

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from the cycle of reincarnation by attaining Nirvana. The main difference is that it rejects the caste system.

Jainism, traditionally known as Jain Dharma, is one of the oldest religions in the world. Jainism does not have a single founder; it is said that Tirthankaras revealed the beliefs over a long period of time. “A Tirthankara is considered omniscient, a role model, but not a god.”\(^\text{13}\) There have been 24 Tirthankaras in what the Jains call the ‘present day’\(^\text{14}\). One of the main characteristics of Jain beliefs is the emphasis on the immediate consequence of a person’s behavior. They believe that every human is responsible for their actions and all living beings have an eternal soul. Jainism stresses spiritual independence and equality of all life with particular emphasis on non-violence. It is similar to Hinduism and Buddhism in that it believes in Karma and Moksha and rejects the caste system like Buddhism. Jainism has remained relatively small but has had a large impact on ethical, political, and economic aspects of Indian society and culture. For instance, Jainism contributed to Mohandas Gandhi’s politics, which led to the mainly non-violent movement for Indian independence.

Unlike the religions that developed in the Middle East, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Indian religions are much more individually orientated. They offer paths and teachings for the individual to find peace in their life. The Indian religions are modeled on how the religion can benefit the individual. On the other hand, the Middle East religions are more associated with how the individual can please his god, church and religion and what the individual has done wrong that would create a unfavorable


judgment by their god based on the individual’s actions. The Middle Eastern religions
developed to give people hope and a cause during times of hardship, whether that is
during times of persecution, slavery, or war. Whereas the Indian religions developed into
ways for the individual to live their life in accordance with nature and harmony. This is
because they did not develop during times of hardship; they developed during times of
peace. The Religions reflect this through their beliefs, values, teachings, and systems of
thought.
Bibliography

Essay 1


Essay 2


