

FRAME IT YOURSELF

Changing the Frame

Playing “what if?” with the salvation religions sounds easy. What if Constantine had converted to Mithraism, the religion of much of the Roman army, instead of Christianity? What if Ashoka had not converted to Buddhism? What if Muhammad had died ten years earlier than he actually did? But pondering such questions productively (they cannot be answered, of course) requires some serious thought about the relationship of the religions to their contexts. Did hierarchical power dynamics and network connections, the evolutionary environment for the religions’ development, matter more than the religions’ specific doctrines? Would any of these “what ifs” have led the world down a radically different path, or would the path be closely parallel to the one we have already followed? Consider and defend an alternate history based on one of these questions.

King Ashoka, the king of kings, converted to Buddhism and made it the royal religion of India. If King Ashoka had not converted to Buddhism today, India would be still a Buddhist country. Whether the king had a religion or not, the cultured populace rejected religion, and the populace was always in the majority. Over time, Buddhists were forced to leave India in order to survive.

Thus, one reason for Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism may be that he continued his current course and found solace in a Buddhist version of Shramanism. The second reason was that he had found a group of loyal followers who could develop Buddhism and use it as a starting point for usurping the throne.

This trend towards Sramana philosophy continued after Ashoka. His successor and grandson, Emperor Sanrapati, was a devout Jain. His followers alternated between Jainism and Buddhism. The Ajivika philosophy gradually disappeared, mainly due to the cold-blooded killing of monks by King Ashoka.

Also, if King Ashoka did not converted to buddhism, he would not began to draw landmarks with meaningful explanations to honor Buddhism. Amazing icons like the Lion Pillar and the Dhammatzaka Wheel of Life will not exist and are probably not strong enough to stand the test of time for about 2,000 years.