

The Blurring Boundary: Nonviolent Religious Conversion

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Abstract. This article introduces the concept of "blurring-boundary" to illustrate the ways Nestorianism adopted in Tang Dynasty to secure legal recognition and to conduct its localization within Chinese society. Through an analysis of the Nestorian Stele and the Zhixuan Anle Sutra, this paper demonstrates how Nestorianism expressed Christian doctrine by drawing on the linguistic structures and cosmological terms of Buddhism and Taoism, thereby gaining acceptance in the ideological system within Tang China. Unlike Buddhism's broad popular base and Islam's community-based mode for communication, Nestorianism adopted elite-targeted communication strategies aimed at the imperial and scholar-officialdom, emphasizing political obedience, metaphysical compatibility, and linguistic adaptation in its attempt to participate in the royal network dominated by Buddhism. Through comparative religious and political discourse analysis, this paper highlights a distinctly "non-confrontational" mode of religious adaptation that offers a new perspective on the mechanism of coexistence within dominant cultural systems. While this paper mainly focuses on textual strategies rather than practical networks, it aims to provide theoretical reference for future research on religious transmission and cultural boundary.

Keywords: Nestorianism, cultural adaptation, Buddhism, Islam, shared patronage, Tang Dynasty

1. Introduction

With the development of the Silk Road, growing commercial activities and cultural exchange increasingly interconnected Central Asia and East Asia from the sixth to the thirteenth century CE, intensifying religious interaction across the region. In addition to friendly interreligious exchanges and integration, conflicts also emerged, including armed conflicts between the Islamic world and Buddhism in the seventh century CE Central Asia, and tensions among Buddhism, Nestorianism, and Zoroastrianism during the Tang Dynasty.

Yet, among this landscape of competition and conflict, certain cases reveal a more nuanced dynamic. One example is the strategy employed by Nestorian Christianity, which this paper defines as "boundary-blurring". Nestorianism is originated in Syria. It faced a society that had already been shaped by long-standing Buddhist, Taoist, and local Confucian traditions when it is trying to establish its legitimacy in China. During the Tang Dynasty, Nestorianism adopted this religious ambiguity to avoid being perceived as heresy by the locals, which can be exemplified most clearly in the Nestorian Stele and the Zhixuan Anle Sutra, where Christian doctrines are articulated through

the rhetorical forms and cosmological terms of Buddhism and Taoism. This paper defines boundary-blurring as a strategy of localization that absorbs elements of the dominant religious discourse selectively while preserving an independent doctrinal identity to a certain extent.

Beyond conceptual adaptation, the boundary-blurring strategy also operated at the ruling class. Nestorian strategies were designed mainly to align the religion with imperial power, a distinct from the mass-oriented ways of localization found in other religions. This measure of boundary-blurring is especially significant in the Tang context, where religious legitimacy was closely related to the imperial patronage. In a political system where the Emperor's endowment determined a religion's lawfulness, Nestorianism sought support among the existing networks of imperial power. Long before Nestorianism arrived in China, Buddhism had already been firmly entrenched within the imperial household, limiting the space for other religion to gain direct royal allegiance. As the royal family could not embrace two doctrines simultaneously, Nestorianism presented itself as compatible, non-intrusive, and politically obedient to claim shared royal patronage. This strategy allowed Nestorianism to gain relatively consistent imperial support without directly competing with Buddhism, enabling its continued development and survival in China.

Boundary-blurring also functioned through differentiation. In the context of the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism increasingly exhibited social tensions, such as the accumulation of large quantities of wealth, mobilization of large followings, and growing political influence. Nestorianism presented itself as a socially stable and politically unobtrusive religion instead, setting it apart from Buddhism. Building on this, Nestorianism distinguished itself from Buddhism by positioning itself as a less socially disruptive alternative that didn't require the building of houses of worship, didn't have a significant impact on the general public, and communicated a doctrinal identity that didn't threaten the Tang court's political authority. Through this adaptive approach, Nestorianism successfully prolonged its presence as a small foreign religion in China and demonstrated boundary-blurring as an effective strategy in contexts of religious competition.

2. Literature review

The spread of religion along the Silk Road have been widely discussed in academic scholarship, particularly focusing on Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity (including Nestorianism) . Abu-Lughod's study of cross-cultural networks emphasizes that the Silk Road functioned as both a commercial route and a critical arena for cultural and religious convergence, often accompanied by integration and conflict [1]. Mentioned in Peter Brown's work, the "cultural adaptation" strategies of the late Roman Empire provides an important comparative framework for understanding how foreign religions adjust to new cultural environments [2]. Within this broader field, studies focusing specifically on the spread and development of Nestorianism in Tang China have explored how the tradition was expressed in Chinese context. Saeki Yoshiro's early interpretation of the Nestorian Stele revealed that Nestorianism achieved the localization of its doctrines through a strategy of "term borrowing," which provides a significant reference for further understanding how Nestorianism adapted its doctrinal expressions to local Buddhist and Taoist vocabulary [3]. While Samuel N.C. Lieu, placing Nestorianism in the larger West Asian context, contrasts its relatively non-violent expansion with the more confrontational expansion of Islam in Central Asia, emphasizing Nestorianism's approach to cross-cultural transmission, Carter also highlights that the key to Nestorianism's official support in the Tang Dynasty is its adaptation to the Chinese Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, arguing that official support depended less on cultural accommodation [4].

Recent scholars have further consider this understanding from the linguistic and textual dimensions. Wang Bangwei and others pointed out that the use of terminology in Dunhuang texts such as the "Zhi Xuan Anle Sutra" indicated Nestorian use of Buddhist terminology should be seen as not only a translation technique but also as a deliberate strategy to lower the acceptance threshold [5]. Although Nestorianism only existed for a brief time in Chinese history and quickly declined following the Hui-chang persecution, existing research has generally shown that its existence offers important evidence for comprehending nonviolent religious dissemination, blurred cultural boundaries, and the complicated relationship between imperial authority and religious transmission. However, previous research tended to view Nestorianism's linguistic and political transformations in Tang China as distinct phenomena, lacking a compositive framework for understanding how they functioned as a cohesive adaptive strategy. Building on this, this paper presents the idea of "Blurring-Boundary" based on previous research, differentiating it from the more conventional idea of "localization", and employs it as a crucial theoretical tool for understanding religious conflict and harmonious coexistence within prevailing cultural systems.

3. Historical and theological background of Nestorianism

Nestorianism, commonly associated with the East-Syriac Christian tradition and referred to in Chinese sources as Jingjiao("Luminous Religion") or Daqin Christianity,was originated in the Syriac-speaking Christian communities of the late antique Near East. Although the term Nestorianism derives from Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople (428-431 AD), whose Christian views formed the theological basis of the Eastern Christian branch of Nestorianism, the theological orientation of the Church of East ultimately developed independently of the Byzantine ecclesiastical system. Nestorius' point of view is line with dyophysite Christology, which emphasize the distinction between the divine and human natures of Christ . Unlike later Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox traditions, which stressed the hypostatic union (the inseparable union of the two natures in one person), Nestorian theologians articulated a looser conceptual separation, suggesting a conjunctive model of union (synapheia), where the divine natures and the human Jesus were joined without being metaphysically fused.

However, precisely because of the way Nestorius interpreted the "relationship between man and God," he was accused of belittling the divinity of Christ, especially when he objected to the use of the term "Theotokos" (Mother of God) to describe the Virgin Mary and instead proposed "Christotokos" (Mother of Christ). This theological controversy eventually erupted at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. While the council defined his position as heretical within the Byzantine sphere [6], Christian communities east of the Roman Empire, particularly within the Sasanian Empire, did not accept this estimation. These communities continued to develop an East-Syriac tradition that merged into what is known today as the Church of the East [7].

Nestorianism highlights that Christ's "human nature" and "divine nature" are parallel and distinct, and this understanding of the coexistence of the sacred and the secular demonstrates greater adaptability when it spread to cross-cultural contexts in China and Central Asia. In the Sasanian environment, for instance, certain elements of Zoroastrian dualism provided a framework through which East-Syriac theological categories could be intelligibly articulated. Similar to this, ideas from medieval Taoist discourse, such as the distinction between Dao and form and between emptiness and materiality, explained the differences between conceptual translation and doctrinal assimilation [8]. The liability of this helps to explain why Nestorian Christianity tended to adopt cultural accommodation rather than directly entering into sharp doctrinal confrontations when transmitted across linguistic and religious boundaries.

4. Boundary-blurring strategy

Different from localization models that mostly focus on the integration of doctrines or the large-scale absorption of local followers, the concept of "boundary blurring" proposed in this study emphasizes an approach based on semantic change, selective cultural integration, and consistency with imperial strategies.

In scholarship on religious transmission, Buddhism is often seen as an example that explains how localization works. When Buddhism entered China, it accommodated to local social structures through interaction with Confucian thought and Taoist cosmological discourse, contributing to indigenous traditions such as Chan and Pure Land. However, its spread relied heavily on a large number of mass followers. Another well-spread religion, Islam, by contrast, is more isolated compared to Buddhism. It is more likely to maintain communal cohesion through shared legal, ritual, and institutional practices based on the concept of the Ummah. Although Islam's approach is hard to be considered as localized, Buddhism and Islam still represent two endpoints on the spectrum of religious localization.

Nestorianism, nevertheless, adopted a blurring-boundary strategy that claims a circumscribed position between these poles. On the one hand, at the semantic level, it used Buddhist and Taoist conceptual resources to articulate Christian doctrines in intelligible terms. On the other, at the political level, it aligned its discourse with the rhetoric of imperial legitimacy, embedding its teachings in the ideal expectations of the Tang Emperor. This strategy neither sought to construct large mass-based followers nor relied on legal-ritual mechanisms of communal consolidation. Instead, it pursued a non-confrontational form centered on elite-oriented discourse.

From a postcolonial perspective, this model corresponds with Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory. In "The Location of Culture", Bhabha argues that the encounter between dominant and marginal traditions will produce a restricted space where cultural identity cannot be simply transferred but is instead restated through more semantic transformation [9].

Although the Tang empire was not a colonial country, Bhabha's framework can be used for conceptualizing how minority religions create forms of cultural intelligibility without reducing their distinctiveness. In this sense, Nestorianism is able to construct a religious identity that was neither subversive nor fully indigenized within the Tang imperial order, through its selective use of Buddhist-Taoist terminology, its symbolic adaptations, and its careful alignment with imperial political discourse. Blurring the clear boundaries between religions helped reduce the political risks, offering a mode of non-confrontational adaptation, enriching the understanding about religious transmission and integration, and more importantly, provides insight into mechanisms of nonviolent coexistence among diverse traditions under hierarchical state structures.

4.1. The case of the Nestorian Stele

In this paper, the Nestorian Stele (大秦景教流行中国碑) is used as primary evidence to analyze Nestorianism. It offers an explanation for questions such as: how it arrived and how it disseminated. It also reflects the legitimization process of Nestorian Christianity within the Tang imperial order, although it does not mention it directly. More of the text is in a tone that shows the religion like a guidebook. This makes sense since Christianity (Monotheism) was a relatively new concept to the Chinese people at that time.

In most areas, however, (including those very stable ones) Christianity was a minority religion, often competing with an established state religion. China is one such case. This monument was erected in 781 CE to commemorate the first coming of Christianity to China in the year 635 CE by

Jingjing, who later in the inscription referred to himself as a "monk of the Great Qin Temple." In terms of audience, the stele was not likely intended for internal church use or for the general faithful, as evidenced in its highly institutionalized structure. The monk crafted the wording of the Nestorian Stele carefully, in which he demonstrates an intention to justify the legitimacy of what was, from the Chinese perspective, an outside religion. So, naturally, it can be inferred that this stele was composed more or less aiming at the state apparatus, the imperial court, and the elite historian.

Looking at the Nestorian Stele carefully, I notice the remarkably similar wording between Nestorianism and traditional Taoism and Buddhism. Given that the Stele was erected by the Nestorian monk Jingjing and considered in its historical context, this similarity was quite intentional. By borrowing and reconstructing Taoist and Buddhist vocabulary carefully, this inscription fully demonstrates the boundary-blurring strategy adopted by Nestorianism. In this inscription, the Christian "God" is transformed into "silent Zhenchang," a term that combines the Taoist metaphysical understanding of "stillness" and "permanence," and corresponds to the Buddhist concept of "Zhennu." This constitutes an integration of religious cosmology that is more than just a linguistic translation [10]. Within the Taoist framework of "non-action" (Wuwei) and "the Dao follows its own nature" (Dao Fa Ziran), the concept of Dao, which is similar to God in Christianity, is invisible, unborn, and without desire. The Nestorianism slipped in right here. This abstract depiction of God (Dao) was well utilized by Jingjing to present Nestorian theology in alignment with local traditions [11]. In addition, the explanation of the Trinitarian theology in the Nestorian Stele ends with "Trinity wonderful body," which is another evidence of a high degree of localization. The terms "wonderful body" or "Miaoshen" mean "three-life Buddha," particularly the Dharmakāya (法身), one of the "three-life," represents the transcendental essence of Buddhahood. This corresponding structure enables local audiences to find references in the existing religious semantic system without understanding the ontology of Nestorian doctrine.

This embedding of linguistic meaning is an "analogical cognitive strategy", which does not directly teach new concepts, but makes old concepts carry new connotations, also reinforces the broader pattern of boundary-blurring as a means of soft entry into complex religious ecosystems.

What is particularly noteworthy about this linguistic transformation is that it is not for the general public, but mainly for emperors and scholar-officials. The Tang Dynasty was a highly centralized government, and religious legitimacy often depended on the recognition and support of the royal family. The inscription frequently mentions such phrases as "Emperor's grace and mercy", "the Holy Lord's rule by bowing the arch" and "the translation of imperial rescripts", apparently to construct the structure of "dependent legitimacy" between Nestorianism and imperial power [12]. Nestorianism expressed its sacred ontology with terms such as "silence", "constant" and "Miao", not only to conform to the local religious language habits, but also to show the Tang Dynasty emperors that Nestorianism was a metaphysical, political and religious "noble religion" that did not interfere with social order, to win the acceptance and protection of the ruling class.

Taken as a whole, the analyses above of the Nestorian Stele show the way Nestorian Christianity in Tang China had employed one multi-layered strategy of boundary-blurring to navigate one cultural and also political climate. At the cosmological level, Nestorianism thoroughly rearticulated the identity for the Christian God by Taoist and Buddhist metaphysical language, embedding itself within familiar ontological frameworks for ease of acceptance. And at a theological level, doctrines like the Trinity that can be easily found in the above passages were rephrased through terms ("Trinity Wonderful Body" for example) drawing from analogies for Buddhist structures like the Trikāya, which allowed Chinese readers to grasp them. At a more political level, these choices were notably not targeted at the vast majority, but rather enabled Nestorianism to connect with elite

audiences, especially the imperial court. A brilliant choice, as it made Nestorianism more noble and compatible with the imperial governance.

Therefore, the Nestorian Stele is not supposed to be simply seen as a record about religious presence, but also as textual evidence of how Nestorianism blurred religious, cultural, and political boundaries in an effort to secure temporary legitimacy. This threefold method, which includes alignment, targeting strategy, and doctrines, is the key to the boundary-blurring theory the paper is talking about, and helps one grasp parallel trends in other Nestorian texts, such as the Zhixuan Anle Sutra.

4.2. Cross-religious semantics in Zhixuan Anle Sutra

As one of the most intact Nestorian scriptures preserved to this day, the Zhixuan Anle Sutra (志玄安乐经) is substantially different from the Nestorian Stele in both linguistic style and content structure. While the Nestorian Stele is more or less like a tool for political purposes, the Zhixuan Anle Sutra marked a remarkable transmission of doctrines and texts of this religion, from the perspective of the general public. This text widely quotes vocabulary from Buddhism and Taoism, utilizing expressions such as "no birth, no end" (wusheng wumie 无生无灭), "enlightenment and emptiness" (miaojue zhenkong 妙绝真空), and "silent luminous" (jijing guangming 寂静光明), which parallel Buddhist ideas of causality and Taoist ontological theories about nature and calmness. In terms of the audience, the language of the Zhixuan Anle Sutra is rather abstract, as if it were specifically prepared for people at the intersection of religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism). It can be seen that this strategy enabled Nestorianism to establish a textual expression that could be understood by the mainstream. Just a reminder, the mainstream here includes the imperial family of the Tang Dynasty, the general public, and even believers of other religions. However, at the same time, Nestorianism is not completely contained within the mainstream consciousness structure, thus forming another manifestation of its cultural adaptation method of blurring boundaries.

Here are two Buddhist terms that need to be elaborated in advance, "Dharmakaya" (Dharma Body) and "dusty World". In Buddhism, the Buddha is equivalent to the enlightened one among human beings, the Dharma is the ideology propagated by the Buddha, and the body is the Buddha's physical form, or rather, the actual existence. In Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, how the Buddha's thoughts spread after Nirvana has become a widely discussed issue. The concept of the Dharmakaya was also put forward here, and the existence of the Buddha is not limited to his actual existence, but lies in his thinking and enlightenment. The Dharmakaya has since become a synonym for the unity and truth of Buddhist thought. In Buddhism, precisely because of this, the limitations from reality are eliminated, and everyone can obtain the "Dharmakaya". As for the "dusty world", it is a common concept in Buddhism, used to refer to all the world associated with human behavior. In the text, Jesus Christ is described as the "Dharma body". Originally, this term belonged to one of the core teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, referring to the Buddha's ontology, the invisible and eternal body of wisdom (Dharmakaya), which has a distinct Buddhist ontological color. In addition, in the Zhixuan Anle Sutra, the world we live in, the material world, is mentioned as the "dusty world" (chenshi, 尘世), a place where human desires and cognition exist, and heaven is referred to as a "place of extinction and silence" (jimie zhijing, 寂灭之境), both of which mirror Buddhist concepts of samsara and nirvana, indicating that Nestorianism has incorporated the Buddhist cosmology into its language.

Furthermore, the title of the text "Zhixuan Anle" ("Ultimate Mystery and Peace") itself also mimics the style of classic Buddhist sutras such as the Amitābha Sutra or Maitreya Sutra, so that

readers will not distinguish the Zhixuan Anle Sutra from other familiar literature when they first start reading the opening.

This method of translation is far from a simple word substitution, but a strategy of cultural mirroring, that is, by evoking the sacred images and imaginations that already exist in the homeland [13]. It makes it possible for unfamiliar doctrines to be accepted in familiar native expressions, which further reflects the boundary-blurring promoted by cultural mirror in semantic expression.

More typically, the biblical analogy of the "Messiah" to the "Maitreya Buddha" explains the Christian view of salvation through the image of the savior in Buddhist eschatology, and these structural analogies greatly lower the threshold for acceptance of doctrine. This semantic processing does not mean that Nestorianism has modified its own teachings, but through the framework of Buddhist language packaging of Nestorianism faith, so that it has independence and improves cultural adaptability. Similar to the Nestorian Stele, Zhixuan Anle Sutra is not a teaching text for mass dissemination, but for scholar-officials and intellectual elites with Buddhist cultural background. By constructing semantic transformation and common image, the subtle theological assimilation is realized. As Erik Zürcher pointed out in his study on the early Sinicization of Buddhism, any foreign religion that wants to spread in China must rely on the adaptation mechanism of the "linguistic form and meaning carrier" of local culture to achieve its contextual legitimacy in the knowledge structure [14]. Therefore, Zhixuan Anle Sutra and Nestorian Stele constitute the practical evidence of Nestorianism's implementation of the strategy of "boundary-blurring" in China: the former is mainly oriented to political authority, the latter is mainly oriented to knowledge context, and the two jointly shape the important strategy of Nestorianism's continuation under the background of religious conflicts in the Tang Dynasty.

4.3. Shared patronage and political adaptation

In the analysis of the interaction pattern of religions in the Tang Dynasty, an easily overlooked but extremely crucial aspect is how Nestorianism tried to share the same set of imperial power support system with Buddhism. In a system in which the legitimacy of religion is highly dependent on the granting of imperial power, winning the approval of the court is not the icing on the cake, but the decisive prerequisite for the survival of religion. Unlike early Buddhism, which accumulated legitimacy by building monasteries, translating scriptures, and participating in official rituals [15], Nestorianism did not attempt to compete with it, but cleverly entered the royal religious ecosystem by establishing itself as an alternative belief compatible with mainstream religions through boundary-blurring strategy of language adaptation, philosophical resonance, and political obedience.

This strategy of adaptation reflects the differences in the political and economic structure of different religions. In the Tang dynasty, Buddhism functioned both as an ideological system and as an economic institution deeply embedded in society: monasteries held extensive land, and monastic organizations performed roles in labor management and financial allocation. Precisely because of this expansive social and economic presence, Buddhism became a target of close scrutiny by the ruling class, culminating in the Huichang religious purges [16].

In contrast, Nestorianism apparently deliberately avoided competition in land, organization and economy, did not own temple property, did not build a sect, and did not involve in political affairs, and its subtext was to present a "a low-impact religious alternative for the court" ** - without strong support from the state, nor would it endanger the balance of politics and religion. This strategy of "sharing supporters" is also reflected in its choice of approach to imperial power. Buddhism served the court through the participation of monks in diplomacy, astrology, praying for rain and other professions, while Nestorianism won the trust of the emperor with more metaphysical and loyal

expressions. The long-term existence of Nestorianism in multi-religious empires such as Persia enabled it to develop a "flexible theology" to adapt to different political and cultural environments. This tradition continued in the Tang Dynasty, enabling Nestorianism to actively adjust the language structure, avoid exclusive speech, and highlight the cultural temperament of "loyalty to the king and obedience to the government" without losing its core doctrine [17].

4.4. Boundary-blurring across cultures: visual and comparative perspectives

Beyond the textual analysis of Nestorianism within Tang China, this paper argues that Nestorian Christianity is not alone in its use of "boundary-blurring" as a type of religious adaptation strategy. Different religious communities in other historical and cultural contexts have adopted similar boundary-blurring to navigate pressures. Furthermore, this strategy manifests within language, doctrinal expression, visual art, and religious artifacts. It reflects a mechanism in the long term of cross-cultural accommodation because it accommodates cross-cultural elements. In this section, we explore these two dimensions: first, Judaism along with Manichaeism survived throughout civilizations using various strategies; second, Buddhist visual elements had been mimetically embedded within Nestorian stone carvings during both the Tang and Yuan dynasties.

Jewish communities' survival strategies exemplify boundary-blurring in medieval Iberia under alternating Muslim along with Christian rule. During periods of Muslim rule, Jews held the status of dhimmi ("protected people") along with, because they wanted to avoid direct confrontation with dominant Islamic culture, they often adopted religiously neutral language and maintained visual as well as behavioral expressions that stressed similarity and subordination. After Christian rulers had reasserted their power, many of the Jews became Conversos converts outwardly embracing Christianity, participating in Church rituals, and privately maintaining elements of Jewish faith and practice. This form for identity management represents a classic survival strategy. Under authoritarian religious regimes, people express ambiguous religion retaining privately and concealing publicly.

Similarly, in medieval Persia and Central Asia, a often marginalized religion Manichaeism demonstrated highly flexible semantic adaptations in response to pressures from Zoroastrianism and later Islamic governance. Manichaeism incorporated the dualistic perspective of Zoroastrianism and the confrontation between light and darkness in its text. At the same time, Manichaeism combined the styles of Buddhist statues and murals, as can be seen from the statues of the Mani Light Buddha in many Manichaean temples [18]. In China, Manichaean scriptures have also borrowed Taoist terms, such as "Wuji" (无极, limitless) and "Taixu" (太虚, Great Void). These semantic adaptations are very similar to the strategy of Nestorianism in integrating Christian doctrines into Buddhism. Both of these examples also illustrate the importance of symbols and language in other cultural contexts. From these cases, it can be seen that the "blurring boundaries" strategy is not limited to Nestorianism, but is a broader strategy that can be adopted by various religions around the world, especially to accommodate the dominance of foreign cultures or politics. One of the most representative material examples of this strategy is the fragmentary Nestorian scripture pillar discovered in Luoyang(洛阳), dating to the Tang Dynasty. All four sides of the pillar bear inscriptions, and the epigraphs explicitly use terms like *chuang ji* (幢记, pillar record) and *chuang ming* (幢铭, pillar inscription), indicating that the naming convention was derived from Buddhist traditions of scripture pillars (经幢). The central shaft bears a Maltese cross atop a lotus pedestal, flanked on both sides by images of flying celestial angels (feitian). Around it, there are some lotus flowers and flames, forming a more Buddhist visual vocabulary. Although the cross is a core symbol

of Christianity, the fusion of the cross and lotus pedestal reveals the iconographic blurring of the two religions.

5. Comparative reflections: Nestorianism, Islam, and Buddhism

In contrast, the religion of the same period, the path of Islam in the Tang Dynasty was very different. They were mostly brought in by Arab or Central Asian Muslim merchants and established trading communities based on ports and markets, rather than being directly integrated into the royal system. However, Islam is very different from Nestorianism in its own scale of belief. Islam already had a considerable influence in West and Central Asia when it spread to China, while Nestorianism was a religion that spread on a smaller scale. These disparity in the influence of religious communication also lead to their different strategies to a certain extent. Early Islamic communities tended to maintain a religious language (Arabic) and a familial authority structure, maintaining their faith traditions through group autonomy [19]. This community self-contained model helps to protect cultural identity, but it is relatively isolated from the imperial network and lacks cultural influence at the political and social levels, which can be regarded as a complete boundary-blurring strategy. Moreover, one essential difference in the comparison of the transmission paths of Buddhism and Nestorianism is their relationship to political power and social resources. By the middle and late Tang Dynasty, Buddhism had developed into a highly institutionalized and economically influential religious system. The vast network of monasteries, monastic estates, and donor systems granted Buddhism broad economic and social influence. Numerous temples functioned as local wealth centers capable of organizing labor, mobilizing resources, and even shaping local authority. However, while this power expanded, it has also aroused the vigilance of the royal family. When this structure is seen as a potential threat to national finances or security, the royal family's tolerance quickly morphs into prevention and even suppression. The destruction of Buddha in Huichang during the reign of Emperor Wuzong of Tang was a collective dissolution of the expanding influence of Buddhism. Alternatively, Nestorianism is does not seek dominance, but coexistence. The unique goal of Nestorianism is to seek a compatible place within the country, but not replacement of Buddhism. This strategy manifests in the restrained tone of Nestorian doctrinal expression and in the deliberate caution of its political posture. Rather than insisting on exclusive beliefs or encouraging mass conversion, Nestorianism strategically positioned itself as one of the empire's spiritual assets, relying on overt political loyalty. More importantly, it penetrated the elite communication network of Buddhism and Taoism—not by constructing temples or organizing festivals, but by mastering the idiom of imperial authority.

It presents itself as an acceptable and respected alternative that does not require the state to suppress other religions in exchange for status. This mode of communication is highly similar to court Buddhism : that is, a "religion within the system" that actively reconciles doctrinal expression and reduces religious friction under the premise of political stability [20]. Nestorianism does not imitate the social basis of Buddhism. Rather, it adopts Buddhist mechanism of political expression, achieving its survival through elite dialogue rather than civil expansion.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the spread of Nestorianism in China in the Tang Dynasty as the main research object, centers on the concept of "boundary-blurring", and analyzes the texts such as the Nestorian Stele and Zhixuan Anle Sutra. The study also discusses how Nestorianism strives for recognition and legitimacy through the strategy of "ambiguity" in language, thought and politics. Unlike the

traditional "localization" approach, Nestorianism does not pursue full integration or mass acceptance, but achieves a highly adaptable mode of communication while preserving doctrinal independence through semantic embedding, religious language compromise and cultural symbol re-encoding. A further comparison with the contemporary religions of Buddhism and Islam shows that Nestorianism does not rely on order organizations or trade communities to build a social foundation, but a communication path that is clearly oriented towards the upper political structure. Through the packaging of elite language, the low-key obedience of discourse and the alignment with imperial authority, Nestorianism sought to share royal resources with Buddhism, a prosperous religion at that time, to formulate a viable survival strategy of "sharing supporters"

As a theoretical tool to study how foreign religions achieve self-interpretation in the context of religious conflicts, "boundary-blurring" can help us rethink the relationship between religious transmission and cultural adaptation. Rather than aligning with traditional localization, which stresses full integration, or with the conflict-oriented logic of religious exclusivism, it occupies a gray zone between identification and reservation.

Of course, there are still some shortcomings. Due to the limitation of materials, the research on Nestorianism in the Tang Dynasty (such as rituals, rituals, daily communication) is still relatively limited. At the same time, the applicability of this strategy in other religious traditions, such as Manichaeism, or modern intercultural religious transmission warrants further exploration. Nevertheless, this paper hopes to provide a new perspective for understanding the way religion exists in the order of power and the boundary of culture through the proposal of "boundary-blurring" and case analysis.

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