**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**Cultures in Transit: The Case of Manichaeism (Chapter 7)**

**SLIDE 7.1**

In considering religions, are world historians biased against “failures” or against cultural traditions that did not long endure? You might think so if you noticed barely a passing reference in *Ways of the World* to the important but long extinct religion of Manichaeism ma-nə-(ˌ)kē-ˌi-zəm that emerged and spread along the Silk Roads during the third century CE. Despite its brief appearance on the world stage, this religion raises many questions of historical significance.

**SLIDE 7.2 [Images: Classic Indian Buddha and St Mark’s Basilica]**

Manichaeism provides a fascinating case study of how an individual who was in search of spiritual enlightenment engaged with existing traditions to generate something new and startling. Its founder, the Prophet Mani, was born in the Persian Parthian Empire in the heartland of the Zoroastrian faith to parents of a Jewish-Christian sect. Later in life he travelled along the Silk Roads to modern Afghanistan where he studied Indian religious traditions. Through the experience of prophetic revelations, Mani became convinced that his new religion would build upon and supersede the incomplete teachings of the Buddha, Jesus, and Zarathustra. Mani taught a dualistic outlook focused on a cosmic struggle in this world between good and evil. Key to this struggle was the setting free of a spiritual force in the form of light from the evil material world of darkness and matter. While his message was distinct, it drew on concepts familiar to followers of other faiths making it both comprehensible and attractive to many. Mani was a product of his times offering a new religious message for the increasingly connected world in which he lived.

**SLIDE 7.3 [Map: The Silk Roads]**

He was also a fervent missionary who attracted a considerable following in many trading towns along the Silk Roads and beyond. Mani, himself, found supporters in Persia for a time. When he returned to Persia from his studies in the east in 242 CE he joined the court of Shapur (shapoor) the First, although he failed to convert the Zoroastrian emperor to his new faith. Further to the West, Manichaeism briefly challenged Christianity in the Roman Empire. By the early fourth century Mani’s supporters had established monasteries in Rome and his message attracted many followers, including, for a time, the great Christian thinker Saint Augustine. Adherents also spread his faith to some regions of China.

**SLIDE 7.4 [Map: The Silk Roads]**

But Mani’s teachings frequently elicited hostile reactions from the followers of more established faiths. At the behest of Zoroastrian clergy, the new Persian Emperor Bahram the First arrested Mani in 274 CE, and he died shortly after in prison. In 296 CE, Emperor Diocletian outlawed the faith in the Roman Empire and through time its active suppression by Christian authorities led to its disappearance in the region. Later, Islamic rulers continued the suppression of the faith and in the ninth century China outlawed Manichaeism as part of a wider crackdown on foreign religions.

**SLIDE 7.5 [Map: The spread of Early Christianity and Buddhism]**

Despite the ultimate disappearance of Manichaeism, its founder’s life and teachings reveal how the interaction between faith traditions along the trade routes of Eurasia inspired new religious movements and how trade networks served as conduits for the spread of these ideas. It also raises the question as to why other traditions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam that likewise spread across the long-distance trade routes of Afro-Eurasia world have persisted to this day, while Manichaeism did not.

Furthermore, Manichaeism poses that perennial historical issue: how does cultural or religious change occur? Were new faiths like Mani’s the result of particular political social or economic conditions? Were they the product of personal inspiration or revelation? Or do they derive from some combination of these two? And finally, Manichaeism reminds us that human efforts that do not long persist may nonetheless be instructive, pregnant with significance, and useful in exploring the human past.