

this seems to have been done largely by way of political support for ‘free enterprise’ causes and Republican presidents. Spiritual Mobilization’s corporate supporters Crane and Pew were Christian libertarians—at least on economic matters—but for them this was about their personal political and religious convictions rather than activities undertaken to benefit commerce. There was also nothing in common between Spiritual Mobilization’s message and the ‘religious patriotism’ of Nixon. More generally, Kruse does not pay enough attention to the religious and political differences between those whom he discusses.

‘Civic religion’, however, is disturbing. Its dynamics are different between the US and Australia. We don’t espouse religious patriotism, as do many Americans, and there is not the same degree of religious—or political—populism (although One Nation and the Palmer United Party perhaps suggest some potential for this). In the US the issue is complicated by the Bill of Rights including the constitutional separation of church and state as well as the activist role of the Supreme Court.

Yet there is a general problem here. Why should the genuinely religious put up with the public solemnisation of events with vanilla formulations of religious sentiments that implicitly suggest that significant differences between their faiths are unimportant? What should the non-religious, such as myself, make of, say, the sanctification of mourning for public disasters when it might seem to us that if God were powerful and good in the way that the Abrahamic faiths suggest, we should be asking Him why he allowed the disasters to occur in the first place? Above all, the real message we should take from Kruse’s book is that we should not be willing to put up with politicians draping themselves with the mantle of religion.

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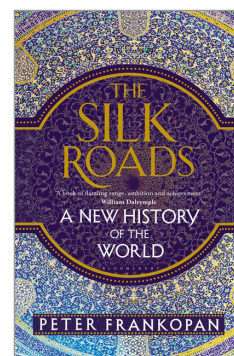


## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (eds), *The Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 2 See Nancy Tatom Ammerman’s *Baptist Battles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), where she gives an account of a populist, fundamentalist take-over of the Southern Baptist Convention.
- 3 See George M. Marsden’s discussion of Graham’s connections with Fuller Theological Seminary in his book *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

## The Silk Roads: A New History of the World

By Peter Frankopan  
London: Bloomsbury, 2015  
\$29.99, 636 pages  
ISBN 978-1-4088-3998-0



**Reviewed by  
Wolfgang Kasper**

This is Big History spiced up with much small detail. The title alludes to the long-distance trade between China and the West, which flourished first in Antiquity and then again during the 13th and 14th centuries. The author, Dr Peter Frankopan, an Oxford-based expert on Byzantine history, seems to have been predisposed by his Croatian background to look at history not so much from a British-maritime as a transcontinental land-route angle. The plural—*Silk Roads*—refers to multiple land routes through Central Asia and maritime connections around South Asia into the Gulf. The term was first applied in 1877 to the vast, disparate region between the Far East and the Far West by Prussian geographer-adventurer Ferdinand von Richthofen; it has retained an aura of mystery and fascination. The title, of course, also alludes to present-day efforts to build new, faster communications between ascendant China and old Europe.

I opened the tome with great anticipation: How did the achievements of the advanced Han civilisation influence Rome? What did they think in Chang’an (present-day Xian) about the Mediterranean West in Antiquity? What did almost-industrial Song

civilisation contribute to Europe's resurgence after the Dark Ages? How was the Far West perceived in the splendid capital Kaifeng during the flourishing of the Southern Song? Which of the advanced technologies of that era percolated to the West? I was disappointed in my expectations: Hardly anything is mentioned of the history of the eastern terminal of the Silk Roads. If you want to read about how China's technologies advanced and contributed to the world, look at the work of the great Cambridge historian Joseph Needham, whose phenomenal multi-volume history is too big to be cited here (although it was distilled into one volume by Robert Temple in the 2007 bestseller, *The Genius of China*). And if you want a readable account of the fascinating cross-fertilisation between East and West, read Michael Edwardes' 1971 classic *East-West Passage: The Travel of Ideas, Arts and Inventions Between Asia and the Western World*. None of these sources are even mentioned in the book under review.

This account concentrates instead on the regions traversed by the Silk Roads between the Levant and the Himalayas, in particular Persia and the Gulf, but sometimes oddly enough also the Ukraine. As we progress along the timeline, we read more and more about how the Mideast influenced European development. There is much about the Mongols, too; and I welcomed the rehabilitation of Chinggis Khan's heirs, who initially deserved their bad press in Europe and China, but whose subsequent *Pax Mongolica* and business-friendly trade policies facilitated a massive resurgence of the trans-Asia trade in the 13th to 15th centuries.

What I have written so far derives from the fact that my expectations were misled by the title. Gradually, it became clear that this book is about long-distance connections of trade, investment, ideas, conflict and disease anywhere in the world. The sub-title is correct: 'A New History of the World'. The author tells us of surprising long-distance chains of cause and effect; for example, how American silver altered East-Asian economies post-Columbus, or how British fears of Russian expansion in Asia helped trigger the Great War.

Frankopan demolishes the prevalent Euro-centric view that the Mediterranean was the cradle of civilisation. He also dismisses the view that the Europeans were the heirs of the legacy of Athens

and Rome as mere post-Crusade propaganda (p. 219). The European northwest was marginal to Greek and Roman endeavours. These were aimed at the prize of the wealthy East, Persia and beyond—more precisely the wealth of the elites, as Frankopan shows little interest throughout the book in the fate of the general population. It was in the East that cultural inspirations and wealth beckoned. That is where 'the heart of the world' lay. Only after the riches of the Americas were tapped did Europe gain influence and power. The book is good in describing why the treasures from the Americas did little to promote Iberia and much to turn the Netherlands into the amazing first modern nation.

The final 200 pages deal with the 20th century and speculation about the 21st. The account becomes more detailed and slow-moving, only sometimes telling of how Europe's oft-told history connected with Central Asia. Thus, he depicts the German *blitzkrieg* eastward in the early 1940s as an attempt not only to conquer food and resources in Ukraine and southern Russia, but also as the consequence of Nazi dreams to push much further. He fails to mention that Germany's growing food scarcities had a lot to do with National Socialist price fixing and regimentation of agriculture. To my mind, a few German diplomats and spies in Tehran and Kabul did not make for a cohesive Nazi plan to conquer the Silk Road.

Frankopan repeatedly castigates short-sighted British perfidy and arrogance in Asia, such as the post-war machinations of an almost bankrupt Britain in Iran. These drew the US deeper into the poisonous affairs of the Mideast and still have repercussions today (pp. 408-419). The British, the Americans, the Soviets and the Chinese all learnt that aid to the corrupt regimes in control of the Silk Road terrain could earn them no loyalty, only tears. Neither underhand, duplicitous diplomatic manoeuvres nor the use of the military could prevent problems from escalating. The area between Istanbul and Islamabad is now the malign centre of the world's problems, less as a consequence of Islam or unmanageable demography (as most of us think), but to our miscalculations and historic ignorance according to Frankopan (pp. 508-9).

When historians turn to futurology, a dose of *caveat emptor* is in order. Economic development

starts with the rule of law, individual property rights and lean government. Yet, Frankopan has shown that the region is 'backward, despotic and violent'. So, how can his conclusions be that all of a sudden Central Asia will re-emerge prosperous? Self-aggrandising show objects in the region and proposals for future transport arteries may point to new seeds of life, but deep-seated cultural handicaps, ignorance and selfish elites may well prevent the seeds from sprouting.

In Frankopan we find an excellent storyteller and master of amazing details. This makes for a captivating, entertaining read. We learn, time and again, that noble religious or humanitarian goals are mere pretence, whereas greed, obsession or sex are the real movers of history. Ever so often, the reader also learns that good, secure communications and low taxes on exchanges have been of great long-term benefit for all in terms of prosperity. Frankopan rightly castigates the ruthlessness of Western actors, whether during the Crusades, the conquest of

the Aztec and Inca empires or the trans-Atlantic slave trade. All of which is no doubt true. But he might have been a trifle more balanced (though less politically correct), if he had also mentioned the cruelties of the abominable King of Kongo's slave catchers, who supplied the Portuguese slave traders, or if he had mentioned the Aztecs' copious human sacrifices and the unbelievable cruelty of Inca rule. Both these facts go a long way to explain why these two empires imploded as soon as a few ruthless conquistadors showed up.

Celebrity historians have heaped high pre-publication praise on the book. I give it 7 out of 10.

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