

Today, we live in great complexity and uncertainty, underpinned by the dominance of past global empires. As historians, politicians, and citizens we cannot predict or speak coherently about our present and future without investigating and understanding our past. This past has its roots in the authority, influence, and impact of empires throughout history. Therefore, in reflection of this, this essay explores the ramifications of empires on our world today.

Trade has been a driving force in shaping societies throughout history, with empires playing a significant role in facilitating and influencing economic exchanges. Two notable empires, the Roman Empire and the Mongol Empire, had profound impacts on trade during their respective eras, leaving lasting legacies that continue to shape our world today.

The Roman Empire, under the rule of Emperor Caesar and Augustus, established a robust trade network that allowed Italians to engage in commerce with Germans.¹ The empire's extensive system of roads, totalling over 82,000 kilometres, served as highways for both trade and migration. These roads connected various regions, enabling the transportation of goods such as asparagus from Rome, roses from Pæstum, and oysters from Brundisium.² The purpose of these roads extended beyond mere convenience; they opened trade routes where waterways were not available, such as the coast road passing through Ligurian land. This facilitated the exchange of goods, including ship-timber, cattle, horses, hides, honey, and amber.³ The economic impact of the Roman Empire was substantial, with estimates suggesting that the Italian peninsula was about 30 percent urbanised in the early Roman Empire, and Rome's population reaching about a million inhabitants.⁴ The Mongol Empire, on the other hand, had a substantial part in the trade through its control and activation of the Silk Road. Trade within the empire was primarily local, often involving exchanges of goods rather than currency.⁵ The Silk Road, managed by the Yam postal system⁶, became a vital trade supply chain and postal communication network connecting the East and West.⁷ This laid the foundation for a free trade agreement involving many countries, resembling a medieval World Trade Organisation system.⁸

Comparing these historical trade dynamics to the present day, globalisation emerges as a key theme. The Roman Empire's extensive trade network finds a parallel in the world today, where multinational companies like McDonald's operate globally. Globalisation has

¹ Olwen Brogan, "Trade between the Roman Empire and the Free Germans," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 26 (1936): 195–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/296866><https://www.jstor.org/stable/296866>.

² Benjamin W. Wells, "Trade and Travel in the Roman Empire," *The Classical Journal* 19, no. 1 (1923): 7–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3288849>.

³ M. P. Charlesworth. "Trade-Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire," Google Books, n.d., https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wh7iDAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR20&dq=trade+in+the+roman+empire&ots=WyuVgSjNN_&sig=0tfhmuHRHF77tqM6QofkMsDuc34&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁴ Peter Temin, "The Economy of the Early Roman Empire," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20, no. 1 (February 2006): 133–151, <https://doi:10.1257/089533006776526148>.

⁵ Hansen, Valerie. "The Silk Road," Google Books, n.d., https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=0LYDf02jgdAC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=Silk+Road+trade&ots=XPXu4A8M4m&sig=Bsq8A2VFp-cjaMXerY8bQcqRxHA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Silk%20Road%20trade&f=false.

⁶ Tschung-Sun Kim, "THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SILK ROAD: THE POSTAL RELAY ROUTE OF MONGOL AND GORYEO," *Dbpia*, December 2016, <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/articleDetail?nodId=NODE10487213>.

⁷ Otgonsaikhan Nyamdaa, "Silk Road and Trade of the Mongol Empire," *Mongolian Diaspora Journal of Mongolian History and Culture* 3, no. 1 (August 2023): 69–79, <https://doi:10.1515/modi-2023-2007>.

⁸ Nyamdaa.

transformed the current workings of capital on a global basis, creating an interconnected and interdependent world.⁹ For instance, the ubiquity of McDonald's, with over 40,000 restaurants worldwide, exemplifies how globalisation extends the earlier logics of empire and trade.¹⁰ The impact of globalisation has been significant, affecting both rich and poor countries. The increase in popularity of e-commerce, an avenue for purchasing and vending products and services on the internet, serves as evidence of the worldwide transition towards increasingly interlinked economic systems. Giants like Amazon, with a net revenue surpassing 514 billion U.S. dollars, represent the dominance of online retail in the contemporary marketplace.¹¹ This shift towards e-commerce has also given rise to alternative supply networks, transforming traditional linear supply chains.¹²

To put it succinctly, the empires of the past, such as the Roman and Mongol Empires, have left indelible marks on the way societies engage in trade. The extensive trade networks, infrastructure, and economic institutions established by these empires have parallels in the modern world, with globalisation and e-commerce serving as contemporary manifestations of historical trade dynamics. The legacies of these empires continue to influence our interconnected and interdependent global society.

Religion has had a profound impact on shaping societies in empires throughout the course of history - thus playing a key role in expansion of faiths and building of communities. By looking at the influence of the Silk Road, the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire we gain insights into how these historical events still resonate in our present-day. The Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting the East and West facilitated the exchange of goods but also served as a conduit, for sharing religious ideas. Communities along the Silk Road played a crucial role in transmitting, translating, and modifying various belief systems as they passed from one civilisation to another. Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and the Christian Church of the East all gained followers through this trade route. Before the advent of Islam, the diverse communities along the Silk Road demonstrated surprising tolerance for each other's beliefs, contributing to a rich tapestry of religious ¹³ In contrast, the Roman Empire underwent a profound religious transformation. In 380 CE, the Emperor Theodosius issued the Edict of Thessalonica, establishing Nicene Christianity as the religion of the Roman ¹⁴ This marked a significant shift from the religious pluralism that existed previously. The appeal of Christianity was both social, especially among the lower classes, and political. The empire sought a common religion to unify it, and Christianity, with

⁹ Appadurai, Arjun. "Globalisation," Google Books, n.d., https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5tSUiR07g7UC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=globalisation&ots=n8VhCP7y3k&sig=CSZBTv6kpx0NWzElb1Pzjyf9Yuk&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=globalisation&f=false.

¹⁰ Statista, "Number of McDonald's Restaurants Worldwide 2005-2022," Statista, March 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/219454/mcdonalds-restaurants-worldwide/>.

¹¹ Statista, "Annual Net Sales of Amazon 2004-2022," Statista, August 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266282/annual-net-revenue-of-amazoncom/>.

¹² Steward, S., J. Callaghan, and T. Rea. "The E-Commerce revolution." *BT technology journal* 17 (1999): 124-132. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009640823618>

¹³ Valerie.

¹⁴ Humphries, Mark. "Christianity and Paganism in the Roman Empire, 250–450 CE." *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (2018): 61-80.

its principles of peace and loyalty, proved to be a powerful ¹⁵[15]. The Byzantine Empire, as the successor to the Eastern Roman Empire, further propagated Christianity. Byzantine missionaries ventured into new territories, converting and establishing^{16,17}

Comparing these historical religious dynamics to the present day reveals intriguing parallels. Missionary work, which has been historically influential in promoting religion, continues to be practiced worldwide. Missionaries today engage in a wide range of tasks, from teaching the Gospel in remote villages to evangelising in cities. The Catholic Church, with its roots deeply embedded in the Roman Empire, still wields significant influence globally, for example the Catholic Church has a staggering 1.3 billion followers worldwide as of 2021. Its impact extends beyond religious matters, touching various aspects of culture, politics, and society.¹⁸ The relationship between church and state is another aspect with historical roots. For instance, today certain legislative choices, in the United States are still shaped by religion and the principles reflected in the U.S. Constitution can be traced back to religious values¹⁹. This may be a result of the fact that a significant majority of the 117th Congress (88.1%) identify themselves as Christians highlighting the enduring connection between religion and politics.²⁰ This influence of religion on politics is particularly evident in decisions like the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, where states now can impose restrictions on abortion – an issue that remains highly contentious, within both politics and religion.

In summary, religious legacies of empires such as the Silk Road, Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire have left a profound impact on the world we live in today. Whether through missionary work, the influence of the Catholic Church, the relationship between church and state, or the shaping of ethical beliefs, the historical influence of religious ideas continues to resonate in various aspects of contemporary society.

The impact of empires on contemporary politics is evident in the struggles for independence and the emergence of influential leaders. The historical legacies of empires continue to shape contemporary politics. Colonialism's impact is evident in global power dynamics, as former imperial powers influence geopolitics.²¹ Emerging economies, once imperial subjects, assert themselves. The complex aftermath of empires is reflected in ongoing

¹⁵ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "The Influence of Christianity upon the Roman Empire," *The Harvard Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (1909): 28–49, <https://www.istor.org/stable/1507353>.

¹⁷ Gyula Moravcsik, "Byzantine Christianity and the Magyars in the Period of Their Migration," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 5, no. 3/4 (1946): 29–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2492084><https://www.jstor.org/stable/2492084>.

¹⁸ Catholic News Agency, "By the Numbers: How the Catholic Church Has Changed during Pope Francis' Pontificate," March 2023, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/03/13/by-the-numbers-how-the-catholic-church-has-changed-during-pope-francis-pontificate/>.

¹⁹ Daniel L. Dreisbach, "Introduction: Christianity and American Law," in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 2019, 1–15, <https://doi:10.1017/9781108609937.002>.

²⁰ Travis Mitchell, "The Religious Composition of the 117th Congress | Pew Research Center," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, July 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/04/faith-on-the-hill-2021/>.

²¹ Grosjean, Pauline. "Conflict, Empires, and Political Preferences," CEPR, March 2022, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/conflict-empires-and-political-preferences>.

regional conflicts, economic disparities, and cultural intersections. The enduring repercussions of imperialism highlight the interconnectedness of nations and underscore the need for nuanced diplomatic approaches in today's multipolar world.²²

India's quest for independence from the British Empire, led by Mahatma Gandhi, remains a defining chapter in modern history. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance, Satyagraha, played an essential role. His leadership mobilised millions across classes and ideologies, creating a formidable force against British rule.²³ The movement aimed not only for political freedom but also sought to forge a sense of national identity among diverse communities. Economic exploitation, unequal treatment, and the desire for democratic self-governance fuelled the Indian national movement. The successful culmination of this mass movement marked a turning point, challenging the notion that India was a mere geographic expression and establishing it as a united nation.²⁴

Similarly, in Spanish South America, Simon Bolivar emerged as the liberator and revolutionary thinker who sought independence from Spanish rule. Bolivar's efforts to adapt democratic ideas and social reforms reflected a vision beyond mere political freedom. Serving as president of Gran Colombia and dictator of Peru, Bolivar played a central role in the South American independence movement. The country of Bolivia is named in his honour, accentuating his lasting impact on the region's political landscape. Bolivar's legacy endures as a symbol of successful liberation and a visionary leader who aspired to shape the political trajectory of newly independent nations.²⁵ These historical struggles for independence continue to shape political narratives, emphasising the enduring influence of empires on contemporary politics.

The examination of empires such as the Roman, Mongol, and British Empires demonstrates their significant impact on trade, religion, and politics, consequently establishing the foundation of the world we live in today. From the expansive trade networks and religious diffusion along the Silk Road to the political transformations in the Roman and Byzantine Empires, historical legacies persist. Moreover, the struggles for independence in India and Simon Bolivar's South American liberation accentuate the enduring consequences of imperial influence on modern politics. Through these historical lenses, it becomes evident that the echoes of empires resonate in the complex fabric of today's global society, influencing trade, religious beliefs, and political structures.

²² Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 2021, <https://doi:10.2307/j.ctv1g248v9>.

²³ Benjamin, Zachariah. "GANDHI, NON-VIOLENCE AND INDIAN INDEPENDENCE - ProQuest," n.d., <https://www.proquest.com/openview/754577fbaa0995344b8650cebf763027/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=40080>.

²⁴ Wolpert, Stanley. "Shameful Flight," Google Books, n.d., https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zuoMsBWCTBUC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Gandhi%27s+liberation+of+india+from+British+empire&ots=g0bNptGwKO&sig=FHHPPetji5PHa4e-EPs3a1bybc0&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Gandhi's%20liberation%20of%20india%20from%20British%20empire&f=false.

²⁵ Gerhard Straussman Masur, "Simon Bolivar | Accomplishments, Death, Route, Revolution, Biography, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, December 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Simon-Bolivar>.

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