

Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar  
Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond  
Session on 'Converting States'  
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"From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu of the Liang: The rhetoric of imperial conversion and the divisive emergence of religious identities in Late Antique Eurasia"

### Abstract

On May 7, 504, Emperor Wu of the Liang (r. 502-549) proclaimed his conversion to Buddhism, whilst rejecting the Taoist faith of his family. His act gave the quietus to a fractious century that, in the southern part of China over which he ruled, had been pestered by growing controversy between Buddhists and Taoists, but also within each of the two contending fields as well as between both and the Confucian ideology of the elite.

The official endorsement of one religious option against another was largely novel in China, where the absence of any form of exclusive monotheism and binding dogma begs the question of how exactly religious commitments could be conceived of as alternative. In spite of a number of obviously Chinese concerns, Emperor Wu was largely following a foreign template, the legend of the Indian king Aśoka. The origins of the latter are obscure, but it is certain that it entered China in the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and gained immediate impact. It is also of interest that the legend appears to have been conveyed by the Sarvāstivāda, a Buddhist sect with its stronghold in areas like Kashmir and Gandhāra that had long been open to Western influences.

Following the trail that leads back from Emperor Wu to Aśoka, and wading through the Buddho-Taoist polemics of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this talk will venture further into the background of the Aśokan myth, and land into the territory of Late Antiquity. Avenues of diffusion and religious contagion will be explored, in a preliminary attempt to take stock of the broad geopolitical dimension of religious change in the late antique world. Historical speculation will be complemented by a theoretical discussion inspired by Carl Schmitt's concept of the political. If conversion is a change of religious allegiance, it implies a notion of group identity that may not be altogether different from the one behind political collectivities, and will arguably rest on the same dialectic of enemy and friend.