The relationship between religion and trade is complex and multi-layered. Both impact on one another in manifold ways. The title of this introductory chapter, “Trading Religions,” effectively captures and conveys the complexity of this relationship through its very ambiguity.

The thirteen articles of this volume engage with religions and trade from different angles and offer a kaleidoscopic view of this broad field of study. A group of international scholars investigates, from the perspective of trade, the various processes in the formation and transformation of eastern and western religions from the time of their emergence. Looking at religious dynamics from the viewpoint of trade proves to be profitable since different cultures and religions have been (and still are) brought into contact with one another in places of commerce and along transregional and transcontinental routes of trade. Trade—in the sense of a real exchange of (physical) goods between people—thus leads to contact and interaction between people of different faiths. In this context, various ideas and religious “commodities” are exchanged—“offered,” “negotiated” and “bought.” Thus, a more metaphorical notion of trade comes to the fore when religious goods are exported and imported, not exclusively but particularly on the basis of (literal) trade contacts. It is a metaphorical notion of trade not least because the exchange is not always intentional, nor does it need to be reciprocal. For this reason “trading religions” is put in quotation marks in the title of this introductory chapter. Both notions of trade (commercial and metaphorical) are closely intertwined and can mutually reinforce one another. Both lead to expansion and densification as well as the amalgamation of religions and religious traditions.

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1 This volume is not intended to make a contribution to a market theory of religion. However, through focusing on “trading religions” it indirectly provides a number of perspectives on this theme.

2 Richard Foltz points out that in the context of the Silk Road, “the religion–trade relationship was mutually reinforcing. For example, the expansion of Buddhism brought an increased demand for silk, which was used in Buddhist ceremonies, thereby further
In order to find new pathways into the world of religious dynamics, this volume focuses on four elements or “commodities” of religious inter-change. The essays in the first section investigate the Topology of Religious Space. A “topology” of religious spaces and places encompasses a wide spectrum of both real and imagined geographies and cosmologies which have developed at sites of cross-cultural exchange between east and west (e.g., temples and wayside shrines; supramundane heaven and hell realms). These religious spaces were often connected with trade routes. They had an impact on them and on the trading activities carried out on them. But even the sacred spaces themselves were sometimes exported and imported to other regions. That is, the notion of a particular sacred space was introduced to a different location. This location then shared in the sacredness of the original space; the new notion of the sacred place could even take precedence over the former notion of the location.

The second section concentrates on Religious Symbol Systems which make a religion visible, different and identifiable. One of the main factors in densification is the establishment and the reproduction of religious symbols as the media of religious beliefs. Religious symbol systems are shaped gradually through cultural exchange and encounters, undergoing adaptation and transformation in many different ways. Religious symbols gained significance in the context of trade because they accompanied merchants and their goods along trade routes and in places of commerce.

This also holds true for Religious Knowledge, the topic of the third section. When religious knowledge travels to a new environment, a dynamic reaction is set into motion whereby conventional wisdom is challenged by new and unfamiliar knowledge. At the same time the new knowledge itself is transformed and reappraised in its new religious, social and cultural setting, for religions do not remain unchanged in the context of continuous inter- and intra-religious encounters through trade and/or travelling along trade routes.

Because all of these three elements have an effect on religious-ethical living, the last section focuses attention on Religious-Ethical Ways of Life. Individual expressions of spiritual life, ethical convictions and other forms of prescribed conduct are formed and transformed in dialogue with different religious and ethical traditions. In this context, trade and trade networks provide an important stimulus for dialogue as well as for inclusion or demarcation with regard to religious-ethical ways of life.

stimulating the long-distance trading activity that had facilitated the spread of Buddhism in the first place” (Richard Foltz, Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization, 2nd ed. [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 10).