

## Title: A Common Thread

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:01] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And I'm Martien Halverson-Taylor. And this is Sacred and Profane.

[00:00:13] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** On each episode, we explore the ways religion shapes how we act in and think about the world around us.

[00:00:21] **Kurtis Schaeffer** How we imagine ourselves as people, as citizens, and how we treat each other.

[00:00:26] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Our story today covers a lot of ground, both literally and figuratively. It's about an ancient project that spanned thousands of miles. It raises important questions about human and animal suffering. And whether or not there's a universal practice across religious traditions.

[00:00:55] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It's also about comic books. One comic book in particular.

[00:01:00] **Sonam Kachru** There was a wonderful, wonderful comic book put out by the name of Amar Chitra Katha, like "Immortal tales in comics."

[00:01:07] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That's our colleague Sonam Kachru.

[00:01:09] **Sonam Kachru** My name is Sonam Kachru. I'm an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies here at the University of Virginia.

[00:01:17] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sonam grew up in Hyderabad, India. And Sonam, this comic you read as a kid seems to do what comics do best - tell the tale of a worthy and larger than life hero who overcomes great difficulties to achieve his destiny. And that hero just happened to be one of India's great emperors.

[00:01:34] **Sonam Kachru** That's right, Ashoka Maurya. That was, that was the hero of my childhood.

[00:01:48] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Ashoka is, in many ways, a perfect modern comic book hero, despite being born in the third century before the common era. He was one of South Asia's most successful empire builders. By the end of his life, he ruled an empire extending from Afghanistan across most of what's now modern Pakistan and India.

[00:02:11] **Kurtis Schaeffer** The comic version of Ashoka wasn't just powerful. He was exciting. In the comics, Ashoka rises up from obscure origins. He was an overlooked younger son of a king in northern India who surpassed all his brothers, especially when it came to war. And his story had romance, too. He married for love after meeting the beautiful daughter of a local merchant as he marched into battle.

[00:02:37] **Sonam Kachru** That really, that was Ashoka for me, what the comic book said. It was just, it was like romantic, this romantic vision of kind of the Wild West of India's past, when more things were possible and they didn't have to read Wordsworth in school.

[00:02:54] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I want to take you into the comic a little bit. You showed us a page where Ashoka is looking out over a field of slain enemies, right. And he says "...heaps of dead men, we have killed many." And then his right-hand man says "over one hundred thousand men to be precise, Your Majesty."

00:03:14] **Sonam Kachru** It's very important to be precise.

[00:03:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So those heaps of dead men show what is perhaps a showcase most infamous military victory: the Conquest of Kalinga.

[00:03:27] **Sonam Kachru** That's right. Kalinga was the easternmost region that had managed to resist Ashoka's dominion. Kalinga was celebrated for its sense of independence. And they resisted. They resisted Ashoka's empire bitterly to the end. So it's sort of a last stand. And Ashoka razes the country to the ground.

[00:04:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** You get the sense that he's starting to feel bad about what he's done.

[00:04:07] **Sonam Kachru** From what his own voice tells us, apparently it was so bad...the outcome of this campaign was so bitter and so complete. It was, like, total annihilation of this place and its way of life, that he could not stomach it. That something changed.

[00:04:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So this wasn't just a belated regret invented by a writer later to give a backstory for a comic book hero. We have an idea of what Ashoka was thinking as he looked out on the dead at Kalinga. That's because he began writing down his thoughts about what had happened there, about how what he had done was wrong, and how there must be a better way. His words were carved into rocks and pillars across his empire from the Kandahar Valley in Afghanistan, to the south Indian subcontinent.

[00:05:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I'll just say it's hard for us to imagine, in the Internet age, how much effort it would have taken to do this 2000 years ago. This isn't just one monument that we're talking about. It's dozens that we know about, and maybe dozens more that we don't know about, carved and then inscribed with these messages. That's extraordinary, in and of itself, for South Asia at the time. It really it's extraordinary for anywhere, 2000 years and more ago. And it's even more extraordinary because these edicts were translated into languages from all over Ashoka's empire. They were carved in local languages from South Asia.

[00:05:40] [voice reading in Pakrit dialect]

[00:05:49] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And they were also carved in Greek.

[00:05:51] [voice reading in ancient Greek]

[00:05:57] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And in Aramaic.

[00:05:59] [voice reading in Aramaic]

[00:06:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But what's most extraordinary is what these edicts actually say.

[00:06:15] **Sonam Kachru** In these edicts, the beloved of the gods, the king of benevolent gaze, some of Ashoka's titles, speaks to us directly.

[00:06:25] **Sonam Kachru** The beloved of the gods, the king of benevolent gaze

[00:06:28] **Reader** ...The king of benevolent gaze, Piyadesi, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported. One hundred thousand were killed, and many more died from other causes. Beloved of the Gods, is deeply pained by the killing, dying, and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered. But beloved of the Gods is pained even more by this, that those of different religions who live in those countries are injured, killed, or separated from their loved ones. Even those who are not affected by war suffer when they see friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives affected. These misfortunes befall all as a result of war, and this pains beloved of the Gods.

[00:07:24] **Sonam Kachru** He is overcome, as he says, by compassion and sadness. That he is distressed...

[00:07:30] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And voicing regret, which is extraordinary.

[00:07:31] **Sonam Kachru** And voicing regret. It's extraordinary.

It's unusual for the time in the ancient world for anyone to express their inner life, much less express something by way of regret. Can you imagine, say, Alexander the Great, that frat boy of the ancient world...Could you imagine Alexander saying anything by way of apology for all the havoc he wrought?

[00:08:04] **Sonam Kachru** Ashoka takes a step further when he says suffering is what we want to avoid. If that's what we are concerned about, we should also consider the kinds of suffering we mete out to animals. He announces that living beings, both human and animals, ought not to be persecuted in any way because nothing good can come of it.

[00:08:31] **Reader** The beloved of the gods, the king of benevolent gaze, has caused this edict of morality to be written here in my domain - no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered up in sacrifice.

[00:08:50] **Sonam Kachru** And this leads me to one of my personal favorite edicts, where Ashoka confesses the difficulty with becoming an entirely vegetarian.

[00:09:03] **Reader** Formally in the kitchen of the beloved of the gods, king of benevolent gaze, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But, now with the writing of this edict of morality, only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer, are killed. And the deer, not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.

[00:09:27] **Sonam Kachru** So, I find this extraordinary. I used to think of voices of antiquity preserved for us in these ancient Twitter accounts of empires to be completely unyielding and inflexible, and in a sense, impersonal. But, here is you've got this guy confessing that, you know, it's wrong to eat meat and I'm trying, I'm trying, I really am. But you know, I've got it down to just the peacock curry. It's a little too good to give up, but we're working on it.

[00:09:53] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah. "I'm almost but not yet a vegetarian" is also a way of modeling the difficulty of the conversion.

[00:10:04] **Sonam Kachru** I think that's right, and I think it makes it very human that the idea that the exemplification of morality is a process, and it's going to involve setbacks, and it's difficult. So exemplifying that process has to involve the confession of frailty.

[00:10:20] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Right. Again, something you would not expect to hear from political leaders today.

[00:10:41] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sonam, where are these ideas coming from in Ashoka's edicts?

[00:10:44] **Sonam Kachru** Beats me.

[00:10:51] **Sonam Kachru** No, I'm just kidding. That's a great question, Kurtis. I think when I answer the question with the help of Ashoka. He, for the first time, recognizes that there is a common emphasis at this time to be found across traditions. Whether these traditions be Greek traditions like Stoic or Epicurean philosophies, Iranian traditions of self-control and fasting, or Indic traditions like Buddhists and Jains and brahmanical traditions. And Ashoka seems to want to say the things that matter most to these religious traditions or philosophical traditions are not what separate us, but they are precisely what binds us together.

[00:11:12] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And so, and so what Ashoka is doing is he's identifying what those things are.

[00:11:23] **Sonam Kachru** That's right, and broadcasting them so as to be more freely available.

[00:11:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Interesting.

[00:11:27] **Sonam Kachru** There is an emphasis on what we might call practices of self. Not only in terms of vegetarianism, but various varieties of self-control. The regulation of one's emotions, the regulations of one's speech so as not to harm one's self or others, and the regulation of one's mental states, the kinds of states one is expected to cultivate generally being guided by ethical considerations of how to lessen suffering and harm.

This is available to everyone, to kids, to parents, to farmers, to construction workers. Anyone can take themselves to be potential practitioners of these virtues.

[00:12:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So that's great. He had a pluralist sense of self cultivation, but he's a Buddhist, isn't he?

[00:12:05] **Sonam Kachru** Okay, this is interesting. There's no doubt that he was personally committed to the Buddhist tradition. And he speaks of himself that way, and speaks very differently when he's addressing members of the Buddhist tradition. But this did not stand in the way of his public commitments to a pluralist conception of morality. And that's very important, that no part of his administration was invested in promoting Buddhism at the expense of any other tradition. And he tells us this explicitly.

[00:12:40] **Reader** Whoever praises his own religion due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with a thought like me glorifying my own religion, only harms its own religion. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better yet to honor other traditions for this reason. By so, doing one's own tradition benefits and so do other traditions, while doing otherwise harms one's tradition and the traditions of others. The coming together of traditions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. The Beloved of the Gods, the king of benevolent gaze, desires that all should be well learned in the good doctrines of other traditions.

[00:13:57] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** This is just another example, for me, of how we strip all the complexity out of the ancient world. You know, we forget that it was highly globalized in its own way, highly pluralist in its own way, highly tolerant, encountered diversity daily.

[00:14:13] **Sonam Kachru** That's right. I think one thing, though, that we're seeing with Ashoka that we ought to take note of is that diversity, and that plurality, and even globalization we may say, given the extent of his empire and the multiplicity of ethnicities and languages, is now becoming a topic of concern. Of explicit concern. And so, we're seeing maybe not not so much the uniqueness of the situation, but -

[00:14:36] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah, I mean, it's one of the ways in which the ancient world can really be a resource for us today. I mean, you know, they they encountered the same problems and opportunities and complexity that we do.

[00:14:51] **Sonam Kachru** That's right. Yeah, that's right.

[00:14:52] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So what's interesting is that he's promoting equality on multiple fronts. There's this idea that humans and animals are equal when it comes to suffering, for example. And there's this idea that all religious traditions are equally sources of wisdom, or potentially equally sources of wisdom. But he's not at all ambivalent about his own personal power.

[00:15:17] **Sonam Kachru** No, no, he's not.

[00:15:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** He's more equal than all the rest.

[00:15:20] **Sonam Kachru** That's right. In fact, there are edicts where he threatens people that might conceivably resist his, his imperial message of peace. And that's important. There is an overtone to the edicts where you could flip it and you could take it as a very cynical use of morality to justify the outreach of imperial might. And there are people in India today who have begun to reconsider Ashoka along these lines - that we shouldn't take this at face value. We don't really have evidence that the army disbanded, that there was an attempt to curb imperial expansion, et cetera. And okay, there's a bit of evidence to suggest this. He never apologizes in Kalinga. So the edicts that have the statements of remorse and this about face confessional narrative are not actually found in Kalinga. They're found pretty far from Kalinga. So it's almost as if he's telling everyone else how sorry is about the imperial outreach, except where he did want to maintain control. And that's the cynical side. So, this is really just like to let your guard down and do some PR. I think none of these are entirely right. I think there's got to be truth in between. I think one can be sincere and savvy at the same time.

[00:16:39] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sonam, Ashoka is clearly concerned with his legacy. And that's partially in his having opened up these philosophical and religious practices for the average person. But he said several times in these edicts that he's laying out a way for other rulers, particularly his descendants, to follow. So, it makes me ask has he any sort of political legacy?

[00:17:00] **Sonam Kachru** That's an interesting question. On the one hand, there is the Buddhist afterlife of the stories of Ashoka, where the thrust seems to be that actually, imperial power and virtue and innocence are incompatible at the end of the day, that there is a tension between them. But there have been modern cases of people in political power taking Ashoka as an example of how power might be redirected to moral ends. And I think of here the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. And for these people, Ashoka stands out as a moment of possibility for politics. So it's not just a personal transformation, it's not just an example of someone trying to do better, it is that we can actually reimagine what the exercise of power should look like. Right? There is work for institutions here. The legacy of South Asian religions is that it is up to individuals to put into practice the best ideals that they espouse, and that these are reserved for really extraordinary individuals. And Ashoka says time and again that it's not just the best, but even the lowest among us, who can aspire to these practices. And we cannot put them off. This is an institutional-level reality that has to be brought into being, like we're not going to do right by ourselves or animals only as individuals. We need a larger response. And I think that sense of vision is absolutely what we could stand to hear.

[00:18:29] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So back to the fun stuff. Back to comics. I believe your daughter is reading this now.

[00:19:30] **Sonam Kachru** That's right. Yeah.

[00:18:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So what do you hope she takes away from them?

[00:18:34] **Sonam Kachru** That's a great question, and it actually came up. I'd like her to have the same experience I did, which is to have a comic of Ashoka redefine what it means to be a hero. And the early part of the comic it's about the standard list of things going out, bashing people, getting superpowers, bashing some more people, and getting the girl. But the real moment of heroism is that quiet moment where Ashoka realizes, just with clarity, the full horror of what he has done and then decides to do something about it. So that sense of heroism, the possibility of change, I'd like for her to focus on that. We can be better. We can. We can be different. There are other ways to be.

[00:19:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred & Profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our Senior Producer is Emily Gadek. Our Program and Communications Manager is Ashley Duffalo. Our intern is Laura Logan.

[00:19:47] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Today's guest is Sonam Kachru. Our readers are Chioke l'Anson, Patrick Olivelle, Elizabeth Alexander, and Janet Spittler.

[00:20:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Music in this episode came from Blue Dot Sessions. For more on our work, head to religion lab dot org, or follow us on twitter at the religion Lab.