

Mongol invasion on the muslim world

People



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The Mongols entered history as just one among a number of nomad tribes on the steppes of central Asia. The rise of the Mongols and the beginnings of the Mongol conquests arose out of a dramatic shift from such disunity to unity, and it was achieved through the personality and military skills of one man. In all probability he was born in 1167. He was given the name of Temuchin.

The nomad world he entered was a fierce and unforgiving one of rivalry and survival skills. Like all Mongol children, Temuchin learned to ride with great skill and to handle a bow and arrows. After an eventful younger life his thoughts turned towards the opportunity of defeating his rivals and taking control of the unified Mongol tribes. Many years of warfare followed, the decisive victory being Temuchin's defeat of the Naimans.

In 1206 a grand assembly was called at the source of the Onon River. A white standard symbolizing the protective spirit of the Mongols was raised. Its nine points represented the newly unified Mongol tribes. The gathering then proclaimed Temuchin as Genghis Khan ('Universal Ruler') (Turnbull, 2003).

Before we turn to the Mongols beliefs and their attitudes towards the religions of others, some general observations are in order. We cannot take it for granted that the motives for, or indeed character of, "conversion" in the thirteenth century will be identical with those we would recognize today—or certainly those which would meet with the approval of the purist. In particular, such motives might have more to do with political, diplomatic or economic considerations than with inner conviction.

We should be wrong to emphasize the individualistic over against the communal, the internal over against the outward form of law or cultic practice, and the profoundly personal transformation over against the adoption of additional cultural norms. For instance, the Uighur conversion to Manichaeism in the late eighth century had owed something to economic relations with Sogdian merchants, and it has also been called—like the Khazar afghans adoption of Judaism—“ a declaration of ideological independence.” (Jackson, 2001)

Like earlier steppe rulers, the Mongol qačans presided over public debates between representatives of different faiths. The impulse behind these events is unclear. In a recent article, Richard Foltz points out that the effect of the whole policy was to make mischief, but he stops short of suggesting that the aim was to divide and rule. It has been proposed that a debate took place at the point when the sovereign meditated a change of religious allegiance.

There may be some truth in this: Juwaynis account of the conversion of the Uighurs some centuries previously, indeed, appears to be based upon the idea that such debates were always the means of bringing the ruler to a new faith. But we cannot discount the possibility that one purpose was entertainment—that the public religious disputation, in other words, was the intellectual counterpart of the bloody gladiatorial conflicts which the Mongols staged between captured enemy soldiers (Fiey, 1975).

Lastly, the frontiers between different faiths were not impermeable. “ Shamanism” was itself an amalgam, and we occupy no vantage point that enables us to distinguish some pristine model from accretions that might

have attached themselves to the Mongols' beliefs in the few centuries preceding the rise of Chinggis Khan (Franke, Herbert 1994). A syncretistic approach had long been the hallmark of the nomads religious beliefs; it is reflected in the Secret History of the Mongols, where elements from the mythical history of the early Turks, the Khitans and other steppe and forest peoples are appropriated and integrated into the Mongols own origin myths (Amitai-Preiss, 1996).

Intent as the Mongols may have been on sharing the world only with subjects, they were also compelled to share it with a plethora of spirits, often malevolently inclined and in any case termed "demons" by Western European writers. When Rubruck's little group in 1253 passed through a difficult stretch in the Tarbaghatai range, his guide asked the friars to chant a prayer that would put the demons to flight. Diagnosis of the activity of these invisible powers, and if possible their harnessing for good purposes, was the job of the shamans; and there is no dearth of testimony that by the middle decades of the thirteenth century Mongol rulers manifested a heavy dependence upon shamans and fortune-tellers.

Shamanistic activities are geared to influencing conditions in this life, not to securing an after-life. The Mongols ancestral beliefs and practices and the great world religions, in other words, were valid for different spheres: hence the "tolerant" policy of the Mongol qacans, to which we shall return (Elias, 1999). So it was not at all incongruous that a Mongol sovereign or prince should make some formal gesture towards, say, Christianity or Islam while continuing to observe the "shamanistic" practices of his forebears: Rubruck

saw even those of Möngke's wives who had no knowledge of the Christian faith venerating the cross (Charpentier, 1935).

We do not have to see this as some kind of celestial insurance, as if any of the several faiths with which the Mongols were confronted might embody the Truth and so it was advisable to court them all, although the idea finds support in a speech ascribed to Qubilai by Marco Polo. On leaving the camp of the Mongol prince Sartaq, Rubruck was told, " Do not call our master a Christian: he is not a Christian; he is a Mongol." (Heissig, 1980) Although he goes on to say that " they regard the term Christendom as the name of a people" (i. e. presumably the Franks of Europe), it is doubtful whether this necessarily supports DeWeese's contention that religion in Inner Asia was a communal affair.

It may well have been so; but Rubruck (whose interpreter was proverbially inadequate) could easily have misunderstood the reason for the warning, and a different explanation comes to mind. We should notice that on several occasions the Mongol terms for religious specialists seem to have been interpreted as denoting the religious community as a whole. Rubruck, for instance, employs the Mongol word toyin (Chinese daoren, " man of the path," i. e. Buddhist priest) as a designation for the Buddhists (" idolators") in general (Fennell, 1983). And the use of erkečün (" Christian priest") betrays a similar confusion in the thirteenth-century sources.

This might explain the apparent bewilderment of the Qacan Güyüg at Innocent IV's request that he become a Christian and the anger in the camp of the Mongol general Baiju over the same injunction on the part of Ascelin.

The Qačan Möngke, too, objected when Rubruck was misrepresented as having called him a toyin. It is possible that with one exception the Mongolian lexicon recognized only religious specialists and contained no word for the respective religious community en masse. The exception was the Muslims who confronted Chinggis Khan in the shape of the powerful Khwārazmian Empire.

Here two words were available: sartacul, employed in the Secret History to designate the Khwārazm-shāh's subjects, and dashman (from Persian dānishmand, literally “ learned man”), which denoted the Muslim religious class. But to the best of our knowledge the language contained no word for “ Christian” or “ Buddhist,” as opposed to erkečün or toyin for priest/monk. Even in the late thirteenth century Persian authors in the Mongol empire equated “ Christian” (Persian: tarsā) with “ Uighur” on account of the large number of Christians among that people (Allsen, 1994).

At what juncture “ Shamanism” merits being called a religion, it is difficult to say. It has been proposed that in any consideration of the religious beliefs and practices of Inner Asian peoples we need to distinguish between “ popular” cultic practice—“ folk religion, ” as Heissig calls it —and what has been termed “ Tenggerism, ” centered on the sky-god, i. e. those beliefs and practices associated with a monarchy based on divine sanction. DeWeese is skeptical, and sees the dichotomy as between, not two competing levels of religious thought and ritual, but “ imperial” and “ domestic” styles of evoking essentially the same system of religious values and practices (Amitai, 2001).

A clash between the aspiring steppe emperor and the representative of popular traditions might, nevertheless, provide a framework within which we can locate the downfall of Teb Tenggeri (Kököchü), the shaman who had been instrumental in Chinggis Khan's enthronement but had then got above himself and was eliminated. Rashīd al-Dīn seems to suggest that Teb Tenggeri had a following among the ordinary Mongols, who were ready to believe in his spiritual accomplishments. The difficulty with this scenario is that it was Teb Tenggeri who invoked Heaven's mandate and Chinggis Khan who disregarded it (Bundy, 1996).

The notion that the early thirteenth-century Mongols worshipped the supreme sky-god, Tengri (Tenggeri), has been challenged on the basis of the way in which the term tenggeri is used in the Secret History, the only Mongolian narrative source that has come down to us.

But Anatoly Khazanov makes the plausible suggestion that the Mongols were experiencing the pull of monotheism, as Tengri took on more of the attributes of the omnipotent God. Indeed, a shift is visible during the early decades of the conquest period, to judge from the comments of contemporary observers. The Mongols believed in one God, creator of all things visible and invisible, though they did not worship Him, as was fitting, reverencing idols instead. Subsequent observers, at any rate, were ready to class the Mongols as monotheistic.

Rubruck assumed that they had acquired monotheism from the Uighurs. "You are not a polytheist," Qadi Hamīd al-Dīn Sābiq Samarqandī told Qubilai Qacan during the clampdown on Islamic observance in China in the 1280s, "

because you write the name of the great God at the head of your edicts (yarlighs)" (Jackson, 1994). This development, of course, made it easier for representatives of the different confessional groups to claim the Qacan as one of their own.

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