Ecumenical Mischief Under the Mongols

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The phenomenal eastward spread of Islam along the Silk Route which began in the late seventh century CE suffered a series of setbacks beginning in the mid-twelfth century, when the Turkic Qara-Khitai (from whom Europeans derived the toponym Cathay) took Samarkand and Bukhara from the Muslim Sultan Sanjar in 1141. The new steppe rulers from the East began turning mosques into Buddhist temples, and extending favors and protection to Central Asia's Nestorian Christian population, many of whom were ethnic Turks.1 This reverse in the fortunes of Central Asian Muslims inaugurated two centuries of exacerbated tensions and competitive intrigue between exponents of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam which crested under the atmosphere of religious tolerance of Mongol rule in the thirteenth century.

Echoes and rumors of the Qara Khitai exploits reached the Frankish Crusaders in the Levant, who through a bit of creative phonetics interpreted the ruler's title, Gür-khan, as “Prester John” (Syr.: Yuhanan) and developed the myth of a Christian king from the East who would come to join forces with them in the Holy Land and help to crush Islam there.2 This myth was to persist for nearly two centuries, as the persona of Prester John came

1 The anti-Muslim character of Qara Khita'i rule is glossed over by the 13th century Muslim writer Juzjani, who suggests that the Gur Khan "had secretly become a Muslim" and states that the Qara Khita'i "were just sovereigns, and were adorned with equity, and ability, and used to treat Muhammadans with great reverence ..." (Minhaj al-Din Juzjani, Tabaqat-i Nasiri, tr. H. G. Raverty, 2 vols., Calcutta, 1881, reprint New Delhi 1970, ii, 912.

optimistically to be associated with a succession of Turkish or Mongolian steppe figures having Christian connections. It was at least partly in hopes of contacting this non-existent ally that a series of embassies was sent from Western Europe into the far-off depths of Inner Asia, and the ambassadors themselves often became central figures in the struggle for supremacy that took place at the Mongol courts between representatives of the major world religions of the time.

Prester John stories circulated vigorously during the early thirteenth century. First there were the successes of the mostly Christian Naiman Mongols against the Khwarazmshah Sultan Muhammad, perhaps the most powerful figure in the Muslim world at that time. Then as details filtered westward regarding the new scourge of the steppes, Temujin who would become known as Chinggis Khan, information regarding Christian members of his household (particularly women) gave rise to yet further hopes. This, of course, was at a time when the Mongol army under Temujin’s grandson Batu had not yet laid waste to Eastern Europe, and the Mongols’ westward advances could still be interpreted as directed specifically at Muslim centers of power.

In fact, the Naimans’ appearance in western Central Asia was due to the fact that they were fleeing Temujin’s attempts to consolidate the various Mongol and Turkic tribes under his solitary command. The Naiman leader, Küchlük, is referred to in Muslim sources as a Buddhist, but his wife was a Christian.³ In any event, he was no friend of Muslims, and when his ally the ruler of Kashgar was killed in a local uprising he intervened to put down the rebellion and subsequently launched a full-scale persecution of the local Muslim community, forbidding the ritual prayer (salat) and commanding Muslims to convert to Christianity or Buddhism.⁴ The Muslim population of Kashgar by that time must have been significant, since when Temujin sent an army against Küchlük and promised to give Kashgar religious freedom, a large


⁴ Wilhelm Barthold, Four Studies on Central Asia, Leiden, 1956, i, 35.
number of the inhabitants allied themselves with Temujin’s forces. Following Küchlük’s expulsion, Temujin’s general Jābā issued a proclamation that “everyone should follow the religion of his ancestors and leave others alone”. The Persian historian Juvaini later reported that the Kashgarians told him Chinghis Khan’s army had come as an act of “divine mercy”.5

Sometimes, however, the Muslims were their own worst enemies. According to a later Persian writer, Khwand Amir, when Jābā and another Mongol general, Sübōdei, turned their attentions to the city of Rayy in northern Iran, the local jurists of the Shafite school of law “went out to greet them and encouraged Jābā and Sübōdāi to slaughter the half of the city that was Hanafite”. The Mongols did so, but then, saying to themselves, “What good can be expected of men who plot to have their own countrymen’s blood shed?”, they killed the Shafites too. Likewise, when they proceeded southwards to the city of Qom, it was on the urging of some Sunnis that the Mongols put the local population, which was mostly Shi’ite, to death.7

The Mongols’ Religious Policy

The religiosity of the Mongols and related steppe peoples was generally reflected in what goes under the rubric of “shamanism”. Their interest in spiritual matters centered largely on applications to real-life issues, like acquisition of food, victory in battle, and personal health. Thus they were open to any sort of religious practice or ritual which might help them to find success in realizing their immediate aims. This led to a kind of religious toleration, in which any religion tended to be seen as being potentially effective, at least until proven otherwise. Successive Mongol khans repeatedly asked representatives of every religion – Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism – to pray for them, and the Mongol elite frequently patronized all of these religions through the construction of places of worship and the giving of gifts to religious figures. They drew the line on foreign religious practice only when

5 Habib al-siyar, iii, 27; tr. i, 15.
6 Barthold, Four Studies, i, 37.
7 Habib al-siyar, iii, 32–33; tr. i, 18.
it infringed on their own, such as the Muslim method of slaughtering animals for meat, or bathing in running water. Edicts against these practices were promulgated by Chinghis Khan, and enforced sporadically by his successors.

As the Mongol victories expanded the territories under their control, they required both advisors and administrators experienced in matters of rule. For this they enlisted the services of individuals native to or familiar with the cultures of the conquered regions. Often, especially in Central and Western Asia, this meant relying on Muslims, but Christians, Buddhists and others were not excluded from positions of influence. Muslim merchants, valued for their financial acumen, were appointed as fiscal advisors and tax collectors (although this led to their being stereotyped by the subject populations as greedy and corrupt). Finally, during their bloody campaigns the Mongols made a point of sparing craftsmen and other talented people of whatever race or religion and sending them off to work in Mongolia or wherever their services were needed.

Another aspect of the Mongols' attitude toward religions is that they tended to perceive them as being identified with a particular community. The Mongols recognized the need to earn legitimacy in the eyes of their subjects, and Chinghis Khan "cultivated the religious leaders of the conquered areas, believing that good relations with the clergy would translate into good relations with the people whom they led." In particular, he issued an edict which exempted Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist priests and scholars

10 See, for example, Boyle, Successors, 94.
11 Devin DeWeese suggests that "what is at work in Mongol attitudes towards religions such as Christianity and Islam is hardly 'tolerance' or ecumenism, and certainly not religious indifference, but an assumption that religion is above all a matter of practice and communal affiliation, not of 'belief'" (Devin DeWeese, Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde, University Park PA: Penn State Press, 1994, pp. 100–101, note 73). DeWeese somewhat overstates the case, since his argument overlooks the Mongols' interest in "using" religions as described above.
from taxation.\textsuperscript{13} In general, Mongol attitudes were based on practical considerations, which helps to explain the eventual conversion of the western Mongols to Islam and those of the East to Buddhism.

\textit{Christianity Among the Mongols}

The European Christians cannot be too severely faulted for what appears in hindsight to have been an unrealistic assessment of the Mongols' attachment to Christianity. It is true that overall perhaps only a small percentage of the steppe population professed Christianity, and even their knowledge of the tradition may have been fairly superficial. Still, of the world religions Christianity seems to have been initially the best represented within steppe society. Nestorianism had reached Inner Asia by the sixth century CE at the latest, through Sogdian, Persian, and Syrian merchants and missionaries plying the Silk Routes. Turkish soldiers captured by the Byzantines in 581 CE had crosses tattooed on their foreheads, and Nestorian documents record the conversion of large communities of Turks by Elijah, Metropolitan of Marv, in 644.\textsuperscript{14} An eleventh century Syrian writer, Bar Hebraeus, mentions a conversion of Keraits brought about by Christian (probably Sogdian) merchants,\textsuperscript{15} and the contemporary Nestorian metropolitan at Marv wrote to the Patriarch at Baghdad that in 1009 some 200,000 Turks and Mongols had embraced Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} By the end of that century Christian names appear within the central Mongolian Merkit tribe, among the Öngöts of northern China, and even further east among the Tatars.\textsuperscript{17}

As a result of such conversions, whatever their depth or meaning in terms of the religious life of the steppe, we have a definite Christian presence in Inner Asia by Chinghis Khan's time, re-

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{13} Boyle, \textit{Successors}, 219–220. Jews, however, were not granted this exemption.
\bibitem{14} Alphonse Mingana, \textit{The Spread of Christianity}, Manchester: MU Press, 1925, p. 11.
\bibitem{15} Mingana, \textit{Spread}, 14.
\bibitem{16} Laurence Browne, \textit{The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia}, p. 102.
\bibitem{17} de Rachewiltz, \textit{Papal Envoys}, 46.
\end{thebibliography}
flected in the loyalties of Küchlük and of several members of the Mongol royal family as well. Sorghaghtani Begi, the mother of two future Great Khans. Möngke and Kubilai, as well as of Hülegü, the founder of the Il-Khan dynasty of Iran, was a Nestorian Christian, although she patronized other religions as well.18 Rumors of this Christian presence at the Mongol court, together with several forged “letters from Prester John” which were circulating in the Mediterranean world at the time,19 fed European hopes of gaining a powerful ally in their struggle against Muslims in the Near East.

Muslim Portrayals of Mongol Favor

Like the Christians, the Muslims writers often tried to portray the early Mongol conquerors as supporters and therefore potential converts to their religion. Unlike the Christian sources, however, the major Muslim accounts of the period were written under Mongol patronage, and therefore demonstrate a clear tendency toward revisionism. The Persian historian Rashid al-Din, writing as an Il-khan official, portrays Chinggis’ successor Ögödei as a defender of the expatriate Muslim community in China from the bigotry of locals, by having him say:

“The poorest Tazik Muslim has several Khitayan slaves standing before him, while not one of the great amirs of Khitai has a single Muslim captive. And the reason for this can only be the wisdom of God, who knows the rank and station of all the peoples of the world; it is also in conformity with the auspicious yasa of Chinghiz-Khan, for he made the blood-money for a Muslim 40 balish and that for a Khitayan a donkey. In view of such clear proofs and testimonies how can you make a laughing stock of the people of Islam?”20

18 Rashid al-Din, who calls her “the most intelligent woman in the world,” states that “though she was a follower and devotee of the religion of Jesus she made great efforts to declare the rites of the law of Mustafa and would bestow alms and presents upon imams and sheikhs.” (Boyle, Successors, 199–200).
19 See de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 34–35, 39.
20 Boyle, Successors, 78.
Rashid a-Din likewise has Ögödei rescue a Muslim who, unable to repay a loan from an Uighur, had been told to embrace idolatry (presumably Buddhism) or be publicly humiliated and beaten; the Khan is said to have given over the Uighur's house and wife to the Muslim and ordered the Uighur to be beaten instead.21 Juzjani, writing in India in the late thirteenth century, cites another example of Buddhist intrigue against the Muslims: at the instigation of Chaghatai Khan, one of the Buddhist priests claimed to have heard from Chinghis Khan in a dream that the Muslims would bring about the end of Mongol rule, and that to prevent this they should all be killed. Ögödei, according to Juzjani, "perceived that this statement was false ... and that it appeared to have been hatched by his brother, Chaghatai," and had the priest executed.22

Rashid al-Din states that the Mongols credited Muslims with "great sexual powers,"23 and later claims of Möngke Khan that "... of all the peoples and religious communities he showed most honor and respect to the Muslims and bestowed the largest amount of gifts and alms upon them."24

Thus, while Christian and Muslim accounts each made certain claims of Mongol sympathy, the reasoning was different. The Christian accounts were wishful-thinking and propaganda aimed at a Christian audience; Muslim accounts such as those of Juvaini and Rashid al-Din were written to satisfy and flatter their Mongol patrons. Post-Mongol Muslim writers such as the early sixteenth century historian Khwand Amir, on the other hand are more circumspect.

21 Boyle, Successors, 87. Juzjani likewise asserts that "By nature, Ögödei was exceedingly beneficent and of excellent disposition, and a great friend to Musalmans. During his reign the Musanmadans in his dominons were tranquil and prosperous in condition, and treated with respect." (Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1106). The Muslim sources are equally unanimous, however, in describing Chinghis' son Chaghatai as an enemy of Muslims (Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1107, 1144–1148).
22 Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1110–1115.
23 Boyle, Successors, 90.
24 Boyle, Successors, 220.
ECUMENICAL MISCHIEF UNDER THE MONGOLS

Early European Embassies to the Mongol Court

By 1238 news of Mongol devastations in the Ukraine and Russia was beginning to reach Europe. The Mongol invasions of Poland in 1240 and Hungary in 1241 made it disappointingly clear to Europeans that the hordes from the East were not aiming exclusively at the conquest of Muslim-held lands. A full-scale Mongol attack on Europe was fortuitously avoided by the Great Khan Ögödei's death which necessitated the recall of all the royal generals to Mongolia in order to choose a successor. Encouraged by this reprieve, and no doubt misunderstanding its nature, Pope Innocent IV sent an embassy led by the Franciscan monk John of Plano Carpini to the Mongol court in 1245. This mission, which called upon the Mongols to be baptised and submit to the Pope's authority, was also intended as a means for gathering intelligence regarding possible future Mongol plans to invade Europe. Thus John and subsequent ambassadors represented what Owen Lattimore has termed "the C.I.A., or Christian Intelligence Agency of its time."²⁵

John's account of his sojourn at the Mongol court, during which he was privileged to witness the coronation of Güyük as Great Khan in 1246, bears witness to the sectarian intrigues already taking place there. Güyük appears to have looked favorably on Christianity. According to Rashid al-Din, he had had a Christian attendant, Qadaq, since childhood, and

To this was afterward added the influence of Chinqai. He therefore always went to great lengths in honoring priests and Christians, and when this was noised abroad, priests set their faces toward his court from the lands of Syria and Rum (Byzantium) and the As (Ossetia) and the Oros (Russia). And because of the attendance of Qadaq and Chinqai he was prone to denounce the faith of Islam, and the cause of the Christians flourished during his reign, and no Muslim dared to raise his voice to them.²⁶

²⁶ Boyle, *Successors*, 184; also 188.

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At his accession Güyük quickly did away with several Muslims who had become very powerful during the regency of his mother Töregene, including her financial advisor, 'Abd al-Rahman, and her confidante, a Persian woman by the name of Fatima. Conversely he reinstated Ögödei's former chief secretary, the Nestorian Chinqai mentioned above, whom Töregene had forced out. Chinqai oversaw the rendering into Latin of Güyük's reply to Pope Innocent, and was probably responsible for the passage in which the Mongol emperor rebukes the pontiff for his "arrogance" in claiming Catholicism to be the only true form of Christianity. While Güyük's "cabinet reshuffling" may have been more politically than religiously motivated from his own point of view, it must have appeared otherwise to representatives of the competing religious sects.

Juzjani claims that Buddhist priests were constantly inciting Güyük to persecute Muslims. One well-known Buddhist advisor is said to have told the Great Khan, "If thou desirest that the sovereignty and throne of the Mughals should remain unto thee, of two thing do one: either massacre the whole of the Musalmans, or put a stop to their generating and propagating." Güyük then issued an order for all Muslim men under his rule to be castrated; this disaster was averted only by a "miracle" in which one of the Buddhist conspirators had his genitals ripped off by the Khan's dog, which was taken as a sign to leave the Muslims alone. Elsewhere, however, Juzjani confirms Güyük's partiality to Christians.

One of the earliest and most cynical examples of the Mongols courting Christian hopes for political ends is seen in a letter sent in 1248 to King Louis, then in Cyprus about to launch the Seventh Crusade, by a Mongol official named Eljigidei in Tabriz. In this letter, "Eljigidei prays God for the success of the Christian forces against the enemies of the Cross. He claims to have been sent by

28 Boyle, Successors, 177; de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 100–101.
29 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 103.
30 Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1157–1158.
31 Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1160–1164.

CAJ 43/1 (1999)
Güyük to protect the Christians and rebuild their churches, and affirms that Latins, Greeks, Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobites and all worshippers of the Cross are one in the eyes of God and the Mongol emperor. Actually Eljigidei, recently appointed commander of the western Mongol forces, was planning an attack on Baghdad and was hoping to entice Louis to carry out a diversionary invasion of Egypt. The two Persian Nestorians who brought the letter furthermore told the French king that Güyük was Prester John's grandson and that both he and Eljigidei had embraced Christianity and wished to help the Crusaders recapture Jerusalem. Louis' response, carried by the Dominican monk Andrew of Longjumeau, eventually reached the Mongol court in 1250 some time after Güyük's death, and the Empress dowager Oghul Qaimish sent a reply demanding annual tribute and echoing nothing of Eljigidei's promises.

The report which Andrew brought back to the Near East, which included mention of German slaves languishing in Central Asia, sparked the imagination of a Franciscan friar by the name of William of Rubruck, who was attached to King Louis' court at the time. Word was also circulating that Batu's son Sartaq, head of the Golden Horde which ruled Russia, was a Christian. William resolved to travel via Sartaq's court to inner Asia to preach Christianity to the Mongols, and if possible minister to Christians living there.

William's trip was a mixed success. He never found the German slaves, and Möngke did not allow him to stay on permanently in Mongolia to carry out his intended missionary effort. Furthermore, William's interpreter was an uncooperative drunkard, and frustrated what opportunities the friar might have had to spread his view of the Gospel. On the other hand, William's account of his journey, which lasted from 1253–1255, is one of the most detailed and informative travelogues of its time.

32 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 120.
33 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 121.
34 She was executed in 1252 following Möngke's accession. (Boyle, Successors, 215).
Among other things, William is the first medieval European to encounter and describe Buddhism. His first impression was that they were simply wayward Christians:

In the town of Cailac (Qayaligh, in present-day Qazaqstan) they possessed three idol temples, two of which I entered in order to see their stupid practices. In the first one, I encountered a man who had on his hand a little cross in black ink, which led me to believe he was a Christian, since he answered like a Christian all the questions I put to him. So I asked him: "And why do you not have here a cross and an effigy of Jesus Christ?" "It is not our custom," he replied. From this I concluded that they were Christians, and that the omission was due to faulty doctrine.36

William was frustrated in his attempt to learn more about this strange sect from the local Muslims, who refused to talk about them. Subsequently whenever he asked any Muslims about the Buddhists' religion, "they were scandalized."37

According to Rubruck, in China the Nestorians and Muslims lived with alien status (*tamquam adversus*). His impression of his fellow Christians in the East was not positive:

The Nestorians there are ignorant. They recite their office and have the Holy Scriptures in Syriac, a language they do not know, so that they chant like the monks among us who know no grammar; and for this reason they are completely corrupt. Above all they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them, furthermore, who live among the Tartars, have several wives just as the Tartars have. On entering the church they wash their lower members, in the Saracen manner (i.e., the Muslim "lesser ablation"); they eat meat on Friday and follow the Saracens in having their feasts on that day ... The result is that when any of them rear the sons of aristocratic Mo'als (i.e., Mongols), even though they instruct them in the Gospels and the Faith, nevertheless by their immorality and their greed they rather alienate them from the Christian religion.38

William also states that the Nestorians would not allow members of other Christian sects, such as the many Hungarian, Alan, Russian, Georgian and Armenian slaves, into their churches unless they would be re-baptised as Nestorians. In addition, they practiced divination, and even resorted to the services of Muslim diviners. The Nestorians shunned the symbol of the Cross, and when the French craftsman Guillaume Boucher fashioned one as a gift for the chief of police, Bulghai, Nestorian priests stole it and the object was never found.

During his stay at Möngke’s court William is hosted by an Armenian “monk” named Sargis (Sergius), who was constantly at odds with the Muslims at court. Once during a court ceremony Möngke’s younger brother Arigh Böke indicated a pair of Muslims and asked Sargis whether he knew them. “I know that they are dogs,” he answered. In response the Muslims said, “Why do you insult us when we do not insult you?” The ensuing argument was broken up by Arigh Böke, but the next day Sargis started a brawl with some Muslims in the street. As a result of this the troublemaker was ordered to move his tent away from the center of the encampment and William, as his guest, had to go with him.

William had earlier been exposed to the anti-Muslim intrigues of the Armenians while en route, when he discovered that Armenian translators had taken liberties in transforming his letter of introduction from King Louis into a call for a joint war against the Muslims. Likewise he discovered that Sargis “had told Mangu Chan that if he were prepared to become a Christian the whole world would enter into subjection to him, and that the Franks and the Great Pope would obey him…”

One factor demonstrating Möngke’s respect for Christianity was his appointment of Bulghai, a Nestorian Christian, as his chief secretary. However, soon after his accession his predecessor’s Christian minister Chinqai was accused of conspiracy and

39 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 213.
40 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 217, 220.
42 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 225.
43 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 171.
44 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 174.
45 Boyle, Successors, 207; Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 173, 192. Möngke
handed over to the Muslim courtier Danishmand Hajib for execution; likewise, a Buddhist plot in the town of Besh-baliq which aimed to massacre the Muslim population during their Friday prayer was discovered by Möngke, who ordered the local Uighur governor publicly executed instead.\textsuperscript{46}

It is clear that in typical Mongol fashion, Möngke's policy was to support each religion equally in view of what powers they might provide.\textsuperscript{47} William mentions that on feast days the clergy of each religion in turn would come before the Khan to pray for him and bless his cup. In William's somewhat cynical view, the Khan "believes in none of them ... and yet they [the clerics] all follow his court as flies do honey, and he makes them all gifts and all of them believe they are on intimate terms with him ...."\textsuperscript{48}

Nowhere is the failure of the Christian, Muslim and Buddhist leaders to understand the Mongol attitude toward religion clearer than in the preceding passage; William alone seems to have assessed the situation with any accuracy. Later, he tried to explain to the Mongols that his purpose in coming to Möngke was not for any diplomatic reason but simply "to utter the words of God, if he were willing to hear them." The reaction of the Mongols was that "They seized on this and asked what were the words of God that I wanted to say, thinking, that I intended to foretell some success for him as many others do."\textsuperscript{49}

Möngke, like Güyük before him, enjoyed setting the competing clerics against each other in formal debates.\textsuperscript{50} As a prelude to holding such a debate between William and others at court, Möngke declared, "Here you are, Christians, Saracens, and tuins (Buddhist priests), and each of you claims that his religion is superior and that his writings or books contain more truth."\textsuperscript{51} The only account we have of the ensuing debate is William's, in which

\textsuperscript{46} Boyle, Successors, 215.
\textsuperscript{47} Juzjani claims, implausibly, that Berke Khan converted Möngke to Islam at the event of the latter's succession (Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1181–1182).
\textsuperscript{48} Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 187.
\textsuperscript{49} Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 228.
\textsuperscript{50} Juzjani claims these debates were instigated by the Christians and Buddhists in order to discredit the Muslims (Tabaqat-i Nasiri, 1160–1163).
\textsuperscript{51} Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 229.
he portrays himself as putting the Buddhists, the Muslims, and Nestorians to shame, “But for all that,” he admits, “no one said, ‘I believe, and wish to become a Christian’.”

In William’s final interview with the Khan, Möngke explains to him that “We Mo’als believe that there is only one God, through whom we have life and through whom we die, and towards him we direct our hearts … But just as God has given the hand several fingers, so he has given mankind several paths. To you God has given the Scriptures and you Christians do not observe them.” Möngke then criticizes the Christians for their divisiveness and greed, although explaining that he is not referring to William.

In 1258 Möngke convened a debate similar to the one in which William had participated, but this time limited to Taoists and Buddhists whose rivalry in China went back to the T’ang period. The Khan appointed his younger brother Khubilai to preside, and following the debate Möngke expressed his preference for Buddhism, saying that it was like the palm of the hand and the other religions like fingers.

Meanwhile back in the West, Mongol ambitions were leading to the revived possibility of a Christian-Mongol alliance against the Muslims. The presence of Christians close to the Mongol ruler of Iran, Hülegü, including is wife Doquz Khatun and his general Kitbuqa, lent weight to these renewed hopes. In 1254 Hethum, the king of Armenia, agreed to provide troops for the Mongol army in return for protection of Anatolia’s Christian communities and, once again, the promise that Jerusalem would revert to the Christians. Following the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, during which Muslims were slaughtered while Christians were spared, Hülegü gave over the royal palace to the Nestorian Catholicus Mar Makikha, and had a new cathedral built for him.

Kitbuqa’s conquest of Aleppo and Damascus in early 1260 made it appear that Jerusalem would soon be in Mongol hands. This hope was quashed, however, by the Mongols’ unexpected defeat

52 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 235.
53 Jackson and Morgan, Mission, 236–237.
54 Ibid.
55 E. A. Wallis Budge, tr., The Monks of Kublai Khan, London: Religious Tract Society, 1928, p. 223. Juzjani states that Baghdad was betrayed by Shi’is in the service of the Caliph (Tābaqat-i Nasirī, ii, 1228–1252).
by Mamluk forces from Egypt at ‘Ain Jalut later in the year. The Mamluk victory ended Mongol expansion into the Near East, and may have caused at least some of the Mongols to begin to doubt the power of Christianity and to wonder if Islam might be the more powerful religion. The stability of Mamluk power was further ensured by an alliance with the Mongol Golden Horde under Juchi’s son Berke, who had converted to Islam and was hostile to Hülegü.

An interesting anecdote is related by Juzjani to illustrate Berke’s defense of Islam. A young Christian of Samarqand had converted to Islam; an unnamed visiting Mongol official, “the inclinations of which accursed one were towards the Christian faith,” failing to persuade the youth to renounce Islam and return to Christianity, executed him. On hearing of this, Berke sanctioned the slaughter of Samarqand’s Christians while they were assembled in church. Juzjani also claims that Sartaq died as a result of Berke’s praying for his death.

Berke’s conversion did not lead to the complete Islamization of the Golden Horde at that point, however. Christian missionaries – mainly Latin but also Russian Orthodox – continued to compete for influence there well into the fourteenth century. Their main rivals appear to have been individual sufi sheikhs. Sometime around 1320 a Dominican missionary by the name of William Adam wrote a treatise calling for increased missionary activity in the Volga region in order to meet the challenge of growing Muslim influence there. The conversion of the Juchid ruler Özbek Khan, whom Central Asian Muslims credit with Islamicizing the Golden Horde, is attributed by William to the activity of sufi faqirs sent by the Mamluk sultan. He also claims that because of the sufis, the emperor of the northern Tartars “has lately, along with many other Tartars, become a most evil Saracen, an enemy and persecutor of Christians.”

Mongol rule reached its greatest sophistication under Khubilai Khan, who became Great Khan following Möngke’s death in 1259.

56 Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1288–1290.
57 Tabaqat-i Nasiri, ii, 1291.
Khubilai's initial attitude towards the great religious traditions was a typical Mongol openness to anything that could be of use. Marco Polo quotes him as saying:

There are four prophets who are worshipped and to whom everybody does reverence. The Christians say their God was Jesus Christ; the Saracens Mahomet; the Jews Moses; and the idolaters Sagamoni Burcan who was the first god of the idols; and I do honour and reverence to all four, that is to him who is the greatest in heaven and more true, and him I pray to help me.  

Likewise the Muslim historian Khwand Amir states that:

Khubilai Khan used to tend to administrative affairs from sunup until midmorning, and then he used to gather the ulema of Islam, the learned of the Jews, Christian monks, and the wise men of China and hold deliberations, for he enjoyed listening to philosophical and religious debates. During his reign he ordered the Qur'an, the Torah, the Gospel, and Shakyamuni's book translated into Mongolian.

Khubilai took pains to avoid religious rivalries at court. Rashid al-Din states that the Great Divan included four ministers (Pers. finjan, Ch. P'ing-chang) "from amongst the great amirs of the various peoples, Taziks, Khitayans, Uighurs, and Christians." Further, according to Khwand Amir

It was Khubilai Khan's practice to appoint to the post of vizier four men who were of the same religion in order that disputes and disagreements on religion would not arise and so that the ministry's funds would be safe from embezzlement.

This policy does not seem to have been particularly effective, however, as the following case illustrates. Rashid al-Din records that at one point Khubilai appointed a presumably Christian Uighur by the name of Sanga, who was hostile to Muslims, to a

60 Habib al-siyar, iii, 66; tr. i, 38.
61 Boyle, Successors, 278.
62 Habib al siyar, iii, 69; tr. i, 39.
ministerial position. After a Muslim at court accused Sanga of lying to the Khan about his wealth, Khubilai had the Uighur executed.63

Tibetan Buddhists, meanwhile, maintained their rivalry with native Chinese Taoists, and eventually used their influence (through Phags-Pa) to persuade Khubilai to suppress the latter and destroy their books in 1281; the only Taoist text to survive this purge was the Tao Te Ching.64 A notable aspect of Khubilai’s administrative policy was his distrust of the native Chinese in his service. Although he had shifted his court to China and built a new capital, Khanbaliq (present-day Beijing), several early betrayals by Chinese advisors led him to turn increasingly to foreigners, particularly Muslims.65 Since the foreigners had no support base in China apart from their Mongol patrons, Khubilai saw them as being more reliable.66 Likewise, perhaps, Khubilai’s suppression of Taoists and Confucians was “intended to deprive of their spiritual support the Chinese who were subject to the Mongol dynasty.”67

The most well-known Muslim figure at Khubilai’s court was his infamous finance minister, Ahmad, whose twenty-year campaign of extortion earned him the hatred of Khubilai’s Chinese subjects and foreigners alike. His relations with the Great Khan’s Buddhist and Confucian officials were particularly bitter. The Chinese advisors would accuse Ahmad of profiteering, and he would respond by charging them with embezzlement. Eventually Ahmad’s Chinese opponents were either dismissed or executed at his instigation, died of natural causes, or resigned their posts in disgust, with the result that by 1280 Ahmad’s power was almost unchal-

63 Ibid.
65 Rossabi, “Muslims”, 272–273. Rashid al-Din mentions Khubilai’s vizier Sayyid Ajall Sham al-Din ‘Umar of Bukhara, his son Nasir al-Din who was appointed governor of Qara-Jang, and grandson Abuj Bakr who was made governor of Zaitun (Boyle, Successors, 287–288.
66 Rossabi, Khubilai Khan, 142.

CAJ 43/1 (1999)
lenged. Two years later, however, he was assassinated by a Chinese general named Ch’ien-hu. Khubilai put many Chinese to death whom he suspected of having a part in this conspiracy, but when Ahmad’s house was searched and it was discovered how much treasure he had accumulated, the Khan had his body exhumed and flung to the dogs, in Marco Polo's account, and wagons driven over it, according to Rashid al-Din.

Following Ahmad's posthumous disgrace Khubilai took a more restrictive attitude towards the local Muslim population, such as re-instating the ban on halal slaughter. Rashid al-Din asserts that the anti-Muslim policies, which also banned circumcision, were implemented at the instigation of a Christian official by the name of ‘Isa Tarsah Kelemechi (Ch. Ai-hstieh), whom Rashid further accuses of inciting slaves of Muslims to denounce their masters. As a result, he claims, “most Muslims left the country of Khitai.”

‘Isa Kelemechi appears to have nearly sealed the Muslims' fate for good by pointing out to Khubilai the Qur’anic verse which commands, “Kill the polytheists, all of them!” The Khan then somewhat sarcastically asked the Muslims at his court why they didn’t carry out this directive and kill their Mongol overlords. None of the Muslims could reply, until one finally volunteered, Thou art not a polytheist since thou writest the name of the Great God at the head of thy yartlighs [edicts]. This response saved the Muslims for the time being, but the restrictions against them remained in place for several more years. During that time revenues from Muslim trade declined severely, so that in 1287 Khubilai lifted the ban on halal slaughter.

69 Moule and Pelliot, Description, 216; Boyle, Successors, 293.
70 Moule and Pelliot, Description, 216; Boyle, Successors, 294. Boyle notes that according to the Yuan Shih, however, Khubilai’s restrictive edict occurred in 1280, prior to Ahmad’s death.
71 Boyle, Successors, 294. See also A. C. Moule, Christians in China Before the Year 1550, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930, pp. 228–229.
72 Qur’an 9: 5. The verse in question refers to Muhammad’s Meccan opponents.
73 Boyle, Successors, 295. Khwand Amir states that the verse had earlier been brought to the attention of the Il-Khan Abaqa by “a vile Jew, intent upon doing the Muslims in” (Habib al-styar, iii, 65; tr. i, 37).
This was the same year that in the West, the Il-Khan ruler Arghun sent his second embassy to the Vatican, this time led by the Nestorian Turk Rabban Sauma. In his letter to the Pope, Arghun repeats an earlier request for European assistance in attacking the Levant and Egypt, and states that if he succeeds in capturing Jerusalem he will become a Christian.\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Intrigue and Mayhem in the Il-Khan Lands}

Arghun was the son of Abaqa, who is presented in Christian sources as a patron of Christianity.\textsuperscript{76} In 1281 Abaqa gave his blessing to the ordination of Yaballaha III, whom the Nestorians had elected as Catholicus. An Öngöt Turk from China who had travelled to the West with Rabban Sauma in hopes of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Mar Yaballaha had been chosen by the Nestorians to head their church because of his cultural affinities with the new Mongol rulers. The following year Abaqa is said to have attended Easter mass in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{77} Shortly thereafter, however, Abaqa died and was succeeded by his brother Tägüdar, who had converted to Islam and taken the name Sultan Ahmad. One of the new ruler’s first acts was to dismiss the Christian and Jewish astrologers and physicians at the Il-khan court. In addition, “Idol temples, churches and synagogues were destroyed, and in their place rose mosques”.\textsuperscript{78}

A pair of high-ranking Syrian clergy, who were jealous of the foreigner Mar Yaballaha’s appointment as Catholicus and Rabban Sauma’s as Visitor General, passed to Sultan Ahmad the accusation that the two Turks favored the succession of another of Abaqa’s sons, Arghun. The evidence condemning Mar Yaballaha and Rabban Sauma was found to be inadequate, but their position was clearly precarious until Arghun’s victory over Sultan Ahmad in 1284. When Arghun heard of the conspiracy of the two Syrians he ordered their executions; they were saved, however, through the

\textsuperscript{74} Boyle, \textit{Successors}, 294.
\textsuperscript{76} Montgomery, \textit{History}, 45–46.
\textsuperscript{77} Montgomery, \textit{History}, 46, note 21.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Habib al-siyar}, iii, 119; tr. i. 67.
intervention of Mar Yaballaha who asked only that they be stripped of their ranks.\textsuperscript{79}

During Arghun’s reign a Jewish physician by the name of Sa’ad al-dawla rose to the position of chief tax-collector and later prime minister. According to Muslim sources, “Sa’ad al-dawla gave the governorships of most of Arghun Khan’s realm to his relatives”. The same sources state that “in all fairness, it must be said that during the time of Sa’ad al-dawla’s vizierate all of the realm flourished, and none of Arghun Khan’s amirs or retinue was able to transgress the rights of the subjects and peasants in any way”.\textsuperscript{80} Sa’ad al-dawla appears to have nominally converted to Islam, although he is said to have urged the Khan to claim prophethood and found a new religion “that would wipe out all traces of former religions”. As a result of this advice, Arghun barred Muslims from the court, and at Sa’ad al-dawla’s suggestion decided “that the Kaaba should be turned into an idol temple and that the Muslims and all others should be made to worship images instead of God”. Finally, while Arghun had fallen ill, a group of courtiers captured Sa’ad al-dawla and executed him, and “the friends of Islam were given a new lease on life”.\textsuperscript{81}

In 1291 Arghun died and was succeeded by his younger brother Kaikatu, who in typical Mongol fashion “confirmed all the religious sectaries each in his status and honored all the chief dogmas, whether of Christians of Arabs or Jews or Pagans, and showed partiality to none”.\textsuperscript{82} He did, however, bestow gifts upon the Nestorian Catholicus, to the order of 20,000 dinars. He also commissioned the construction of a new cathedral at the Il-Khan capital of Maragha, which he visited twice during the following year. Finally, Kaikhatu commissioned the building of a new monastery north of the capital; in short, “anything that the Mar Catholicus opened his mouth about and desired he did not refuse”.\textsuperscript{83} The effects of this apparent favoritism on relations with the Muslims of the realm would soon manifest themselves.

\textsuperscript{79} Montgomery, History, 50.
\textsuperscript{80} Habib al-siyar, iii, 131; tr. i, 74.
\textsuperscript{81} Habib al-siyar, iii, 132–133; tr. i, 74–75.
\textsuperscript{82} Montgomery, History, 75.
\textsuperscript{83} Montgomery, History, 79.
In 1295 Kaikhatu was overthrown and put to death by his nobles. A cousin, Baidu, seized power, but his accession was challenged by Ghazan, Kaikhatu's brother. Ghazan had been baptised and raised a Christian. His chief general, however, a man by the name of Amir Nauruz, was a Muslim,84 and promised the support of a Muslim army if Ghazan would promise to embrace Islam in the event of his victory over Baidu. This was soon accomplished, and Ghazan accordingly converted.

The Muslim accounts of this event make it clear that part of the religious struggle in the Il-Khan territories was between Mongols who had converted to Islam and those that hadn't:

Also accepting to obey Islamic law, [Ghazan] abandoned polytheism and the despicable nation of the Turks. That very day nearly a hundred thousand obstinate polytheists became believing monotheists and were delivered from the darkness of infidelity and idolatry.85

Within a few months, however:

... a group of princes and noyans ... who had been opposed to the adoption of Islam, conspired to do away with Ghazan Khan and Amir Nawroz by any means possible and then turn Muslim mosques into churches and temples.86

In the East, meanwhile, Khubilai's successor Temür Khan had appointed a cousin, Ananda, to govern the Tungut province. The urban population there had become largely Chinese Muslim, while the countryside remained pagan. Ananda converted to Islam as a result of falling in love with a Muslim woman, and coerced most of his 150,000 soldiers into converting as well. This caused some friction with Temür Khan, who tried to force him to renounce Islam, but when Ananda heard of Ghazan's conversion in Iran "and that all the Mongols in Persia had become Muslims, breaking all the idols and destroying idol temples (presumably,

84 On him see J. A. Boyle, ed., Cambridge History of Iran, v. 5, Cambridge, 1968, 376–379, 380, 382–384. Rashid al-Din says of Nauruz's earlier rebellion that "because of Nauruz, much damage was done [in Khurasan] and many Muslims were killed." (Boyle, Successors, 141).
85 Habib al-siyar, iii, 144; tr. i, 81.
86 Habib al-siyar, iii, 148; tr. i. 82.
mainly churches)" he took heart and "in imitation of him (Ghazan), strove to strengthen the faith of Islam" — one imagines, by equally forceful means.

It is against this backdrop of tension among the Mongols themselves that we should see the persecutions of Nestorians in the West described in Christian sources. Mar Yaballaha's history states it was Nawruz who issued the following edict:

The Churches shall be uprooted, and the altars overturned, and the celebrations of the Eucharist shall cease, and the hymns of praise, and the sounds of calls to prayer shall be abolished; and the heads (chiefs?) of the Christians, and the heads of the congregations (i.e., synagogues) of the Jews, and the great men among them shall be killed.

Immediately the Muslims broke into and looted the Maragha cathedral and took the priests hostage. Some they tied up naked; Mar Yaballaha himself was hung upside down and beaten while his captors urged him to renounce his faith in favor of Islam. In the end he was ransomed by local Christians for 5,000 dinars. King Hethum of Armenia finally intervened with his private armed retinue to stop the looting of Maragha's churches and bought off the Muslim mob. Nauruz continued to harass Mar Yaballaha, however, and sent orders that the Catholicus return the cash gifts Kaikhatu had bestowed upon him. In addition, Nauruz ordered the destruction of the churches of Tabriz and Hamadan. Those of Mosul and Baghdad ransomed themselves, while the Caliphal palace given to the Patriarch by Hülegü was taken back by the Muslims, who also converted the Nestorian cathedral into a mosque and had the bones of the patriarchs Mar Makikha and Mar Denha exhumed and taken away.

When Ghazan heard of the tribulations being inflicted upon the Christians, he issued an edict exempting them from the jizya (the poll-tax on non-Muslims), and stated further that "none of them

87 Boyle, Successors, 325. The conversions of Ghazan and Ananda seem to have persuaded Temür Khan that Islam was an acceptable religion, and to have encouraged further conversions at the Mongol court.
88 Budge, Monks, 210–214.
89 Budge, Monks, 216–219.
90 Budge, Monks, 223–224.
shall abandon his faith, that the Catholicus shall live in the state to which he hath been accustomed, that he shall be treated with the respect due his rank, that he shall rule over his throne, and shall hold the staff of strength over his dominion". In addition, the new Khan sent Mar Yaballaha 5,000 dinars by way of reparation.91 Yet not surprisingly, “in proportion as the king [Ghazan], little [by little], was increasing the honour which he paid to the Catholicus, the hatred which was in the hearts of the enemies [of the Catholicus] increased, and they forged evil plots, and they sent information about everything which took place to … Nawruz”.92

The following year “a certain man, who was called by the name of Shenâkh ēl-Tâmûr, came into Maragah, and he cast about a report that he had with him an Edict ordering that every one who did not abandon Christianity and deny his faith be killed”.93 This news, though false, inspired the Muslims to indulge in a fresh round of looting at the cathedral. Among the items they carried off were a gold seal given the Patriarch by Möngke Khan and a silver one from Arghun. An attempt by local officials to bring the perpetrators to justice sparked off a general uprising, during which the cathedral was severely damaged and many of the monks killed. Mar Yaballaha himself escaped with some companions and took refuge in the house of one of Ghazan’s Christian wives, a woman by the name of Burgesin Argî.94 When Ghazan, who was travelling at the time, heard of the incident, he ordered the Muslims of Maragha rounded up and tortured until they returned what they had looted, but they returned only “a very small part of what they had stolen, and the rest remained with them”.95

Some time later in Arbil, local Kurds began circulating a story that some of Ghazan’s Christian soldiers had attacked them and killed one of their elders. According to Yaballaha’s history, “fighting and hatred followed, and revolt increased, and evil grew, and fury and bitter hatred flourished in both parties, namely, in both Christians and the Arabs [i.e., the Muslims]. And they laid am-

91 Budge, Monks, 221–222.
92 Budge, Monks, 225.
93 Budge, Monks, 226.
94 Budge, Monks, 229.
95 Budge, Monks, 230.
bushes each party for the other, and they fought pitched battles ...”

During this time Ghazan was occupied in putting down a rebellion which Nauruz had launched in Khorasan. The Christians of Arbil, meanwhile, had fled to the citadel where they were besieged by Muslims, who greatly outnumbered them. Ghazan's Muslim advisors characterized the situation as a Christian revolt. In response to this Mar Yaballaha came to court to present the case of the besieged Christians. The Khan ordered a reconciliation between the Christians and Muslims of Arbil, which cost the Christians 20,000 dinars in indemnities. They were, however, allowed to keep control of the citadel.

Later Papal Missions

The first genuine successes of the Latin church in the Mongol east were due to the efforts of John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan monk sent to the Mongol court at Khanbaliq (modern Beijing) in 1290. Over the next four decades, until his death in 1328, John tirelessly propagated “the true faith” amongst the various Christians of the realm, who were by then quite numerous. In addition to the local Turkic and Mongol Nestorian communities, large numbers of Armenians, Slavs, Greeks and other Christians had been brought forcibly from Europe and the Near East following the Mongol victories earlier in the century. John’s first great coup was to win over the Nestorian Öngöt ruler Körgüz Küregen (“Prince George”) to Catholicism, and his subjects along with him, although following George’s death the local Nestorian priests turned the people back to their original faith. John also had great influence with the Caucasian Alans who followed the Greek Orthodox rite, and with the Armenians whose language he had learned during a previous mission in their country. In 1307 news of John’s efforts in China reached the pope, who responded by making him the first archbishop of Khanbaliq and Patriarch of the Orient.

John’s efforts were constantly hampered by the Nestorian priests, however, who quite naturally saw him as a competitor

96 Budge, Monks, 231.
97 Budge, Monks, 234–238.
trying to muscle in their turf. Eventually they went so far as to accuse him of being an impostor, and nearly succeeded in bringing about his ruin, as he describes in the following passage from the second of three letters he hoped would reach the Pope:

... the Nestorians, who call themselves Christians, but behave in a very unchristian manner, have grown so strong in these parts that they did not allow any Christian of another rite to have any place of worship, however small, nor preach any doctrine but their own. For these lands have never been reached by any apostle or disciple of the apostles and so the aforesaid Nestorians both directly and by the bribery of others have brought most grievous persecutions upon me, declaring that I was not sent by the Lord Pope, but that I was a spy, a magician and a deceiver of men. And after some time they produced more false witnesses, saying that another messenger had been sent with a great treasure to the Emperor and that I had murdered him in India and made away with his gifts. And this intrigue lasted about five years, so that I was often brought to judgement, and in danger of a shameful death. But at last, by God's ordering, the Emperor came to know my innocence and the nature of my accusers, by the confession of some of them, and he sent them into exile with their wives and children.98

John's battle for the Catholic faith in Mongol China was a most lonely one, and he claims in his letter that if he had had only two or three other Catholic priests to buttress his position against the Nestorians, he might have succeeded in converting the Khan himself.99 Indeed it appears that John lacked even the support of his fellow Italian Franciscan and theoretical subordinate, Andrew of Perugia, perhaps having to do with the rift between the Spiritu- als and the Community which existed within the order at that time.100

It clear that the Mongol emperor continued to exercise a tolerance unknown amongst the clerics of various sects who operated within his realm. Andrew unwittingly sums up this difference in

100 de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys*, 184.
his remark that “In this vast empire there are verily men of every nation under heaven and of every sect; and each and all are allowed to live according to their sect. For this is their opinion, or I should say their error, that every man is saved in his own sect”. Likewise Peregrine, whom the Pope had sent together with Andrew in order to consecrate John as archbishop, reports that under the Mongols the Catholic monks were allowed to preach to the Buddhists and even in Muslim mosques, though Andrew admits that “of the Jews and the Saracens none is converted” and that “of the idolators [Buddhists] exceedingly many are baptized, but when they are baptized they do not adhere strictly to Christian ways”. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that John may have made as many as 10,000 converts to Catholicism during his years in China, mainly of individuals from various Christian sects.

In 1336 the Alans of Khanbaliq wrote the Pope requesting he send a successor to replace John, who had been dead for eight years. It has been suggested that the Alans needed someone who could stand up to the Nestorian clergy as John had done. Although the Pope’s appointee never reached China, a papal embassy led by John of Marignolli did, travelling via the Central Asian silk route. Along the way they witnessed the effects Muslim persecutions were having on Central Asia’s Christian communities following the Islamification of the western Mongols. At Almaliq they found that the local Chaghatayid Muslim ruler had wiped out the Franciscan mission there during the previous year. Marignolli and his entourage proceeded to Khanbaliq where they stayed for three years. During this time he claims to have held “many glorious disputations with the Jews and other sects”. It seems the Jews, like the Nestorians and the Muslims, found the sculptures and paintings of the Catholics’ saints to be particularly offensive and verging on idol-worship.

101 Dawson, Mongol Mission, 237.
102 Dawson, Mongol Mission, 233.
103 Dawson, Mongol Mission, 237.
104 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 169.
105 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 189.
106 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 192.
107 de Rachewiltz, Papal Envoys, 185.
Choosing the sea route for his return journey to Europe, Marignolli stopped in the port city of Zaitun long enough to commission the casting of two church bells, which as a parting insult he had placed within the Muslim quarter. Upon his arrival at Avignon in 1353 Marignolli conveyed a letter from the Great Khan which requested that the Pope send more Franciscans to China. This was at a time when the plague had begun to sweep Europe, however, and no further Catholic missions were sent to the Far East until the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

Although individual Mongol rulers occasionally favored one or another of the religions of their domains, their general policy was to attempt to balance the various traditions so that each might serve them to the extent it could. This policy, by variously allowing representatives of each tradition to believe they were gaining the upper hand vis-à-vis their rivals and could act against them with impunity, led to an enormous amount of destruction and bloodshed. The situation was perhaps analogous to the Quranic observation in regard to the fair treatment of multiple wives: "Ye will not be able to deal equally between (your) wives, however much ye wish (to do so)" (4: 129). In practice the Mongols could not hope to treat the adherents of diverse faiths equally, since any favor shown to one group tended to inflate their sense of importance while incensing the others.

In fact the tolerance and favor shown by the Mongols to each of the major religions of their realm had the undesired effect of exacerbating existent tensions and rivalries between them, and the Christians, whose status within steppe society at the outset of Mongol rule exceeded that of Islam and Buddhism, were the ultimate victims of this intensified rivalry. But while in hindsight it appears inevitable that the Mongols had eventually to embrace the faith of the majority in each sphere of their disintegrating empire – Buddhism in the East and Islam in the West – the sources of the time show how much was due to chance and individual personalities. Khubilai Khan's advisor Phags-Pa seems to have been singularly instrumental in winning support for the Tibetan form of Buddhism which otherwise might never have made
such a mark in the Eastern lands of the Empire. Likewise in the Il-Khan realm figures such as Nauruz played a pivotal role, while even Ghazan Khan’s policies have been shown to have been less than uniformly Islamist. At least as late as the early fourteenth century, the direction of religious policy in the Mongol West was anything but pre-determined.