

Nomadic Diplomacy,
Destruction and Religion from the
Pacific to the Adriatic

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The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes

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This paper is the result of my interest in two problems. The first one is hopefully still in the mainstream of anthropology; at any rate it was at its pre-post-modernist stage. In my previous works I have argued that pastoral nomadic societies can never be considered as closed systems by any of their main parameters. They functioned only as parts of a larger continuum which also included sedentary agricultural and urban societies. The economic dependence of the nomads on sedentary societies implied different ways of political adaptation to them (Khazanov, 1984).

However, it also carried important cultural and ideological implications. Just as a nomadic economy had to be supplemented with agriculture and crafts, so a nomadic culture needed a sedentary culture as a component, source, a model for comparison, rejection, or imitation. This held especially true in the medieval period, when politics were often directly connected with religious ideologies.

The second problem that I would like to address is of an almost existential order. Why do individuals, groups, societies and states adopt one religion or another, and why do they sometimes change them? Aside from the psychological factors, what cultural, social, political and other factors and mechanisms are involved in this process? It is true that existential problems are never solved. However, in this respect the heterogeneous world of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, semi-deserts and deserts – a huge belt which stretches from the Hungarian plain to North China, provides a considerably more fertile field for research than many other more homogeneous cultural areas.

Towards the beginning of the Middle Ages this world was entirely pagan. However, in the medieval period the nomads became acquainted with and tried on for size all the world and universal religions,¹ even including their numerous denominations: Manichaeism, Judaism, Buddhism (including Lamaism), Christianity (Nestorianism, Greek Orthodoxy, and even Catholicism), and Islam (both Sunni and Shi'a). They were familiar with Zoroastrianism (including Mazdaism) and Hinduism (including Sivaism), with Confucianism and Taoism. Some nomadic societies not only accepted a religion, but also changed them, sometimes more than once.

But first about the indigenous religions of these nomads. Although they belong to the ethnic type, they shared many common characteristics and traits (polytheism, the belief in a supreme deity, an armed equestrian deity, the veneration of Heaven, Earth, Water and Fire, the worship of ancestors, meditation in the form of shamanistic practices, both human and domestic animal sacrifice, etc.). The basic beliefs in the afterlife and the basic ideas about the afterworld were also very similar among different nomadic groups, both ancient and medieval.

These religions can hardly be considered primitive, or purely shamanistic. Although the nomads lacked an organized church and coherent priesthood compared to those of their civilized sedentary counterparts, they nevertheless had institutionalized cults, and part-time, or even full-time experts in the supernatural who specialized in the performance of religious rites.

There is an affinity between people's beliefs and their circumstances. The indigenous religions of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes quite adequately served the internal needs of their societies, not only during the stateless periods of their existence but also when they were organized in the states, or even in the empires. The two greatest states founded by the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, the empires of the early medieval Turks and the Mongols, unlike the Arab Caliphate, were created without religious zealotry and without the nomads' conversion to world religions. As far as nomadic societies may be called 'congruent,' their élites were generally embedded in ascriptive units, characterized by mechanical solidarity and an undeveloped social division of labor.

No wonder that in ancient times nomads usually did not adopt religions of their sedentary neighbors. Most of the latter were also of a polytheistic type, and their dissemination was almost always limited by political, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. On the other hand, "the tolerant spirit of idolatries" in Hume's terms, did not hinder an adaptation of the nomads to the outside sedentary world. Under the circumstances their group and mass conversion to religions of their sedentary neighbors was extremely difficult and simply unnecessary; only individual proselytism remained possible.

I will refer to the Scythian example. Herodotus (IV, 76) has testified that "the Scythians have an extreme hatred of all foreign customs, particularly of those in use among the Greeks." The Scythian prince Anacharsis and the king Scylas were both killed because of their alleged adherence to Greek gods (Herodotus, IV, 76-80; see also Khazanov,

1975: 174-176). Only later, in the last centuries B.C. and in the first centuries A.D. the Scythian kings and aristocracy, at that time already partly sedentarized and acculturated, revealed heightened interest in the Greek religion and more readiness to worship the Greek deities, or to identify with them some of their own ones (Khazanov, 1982:36-38).

Even Zoroastrianism, notwithstanding its universalistic trends and many beliefs and deities that it shared with Iranian-speaking nomads of the Steppe, was never able to outpass the national boundaries of Iran proper with any degree of success, albeit attempts were made, particularly under the Sassanids, to propagate or rather to impose the reformed Zoroastrianism upon the neighboring and conquered peoples. Despite a common heritage that sometimes went back to the Aryan period, Zoroastrianism always remained unattractive and alien to the nomads, and considering the historical and cultural situation in the area, they simply had no need of it.

It is true that the Kushans converted to Buddhism. However, this case is the exception that proves the rule. Although the Kushans' conversion took place in late antiquity, Buddhism belongs not to the ethnic but to the world religions that in general became dominant from the Middle Ages. Even the historical circumstances of the Kushans' conversion are more typical to the Middle Ages than to ancient times. Besides, the Kushans adopted this religion long after they had become largely, if not completely, sedentarized (Narain, 1981).

In the medieval period a substitution of universal and world religions for ethnic ones in the countries neighboring with the Steppe drastically changed not only the religious but also the political situation in the area, because not infrequently conflicts between states and societies took a form of missionary crusades. The nomads demonstrated a remarkable capability for readjustment. Despite the fact that these religions were quite different, it is possible to find some regularities in the manner of their adoption by different nomadic societies and groups.

First, due to the lack of the Great Tradition, and some other reasons including the necessary motivating stimuli, the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, or any other, never created any universal religion. The famous dictum of Ernest Renan, "a desert is monotheistic," is hardly true, and all the old ideas about the primordial monotheism of camel herding nomads that some anthropologists (Meeker, 1979:93) are trying to revive now seem groundless in their theoretical premise and in their empirical support. The nomads played an insignificant role in the creation of Islam (Watt, 1953:20; Khazanov, 1993). Incidentally, the

same is true with respect to another monotheistic religion, Judaism. It is recognized now by practically all scholars in the field that Patriarchs were in no way nomads.

The nomads lacked two main prerequisites for the emergence of universal religions. Ideologically their societies were characterized by a low level of tension between the transcendental and mundane orders. In social respects they were too homogeneous; the level of internal conflicts and their perception in nomadic societies were too weak to create an appropriate ideological and psychological climate. The nomads could only borrow and spread the religions created by others.

Moreover, if we agree with Max Weber that the crucial element common to all "the Great Religions" has been the negation or overcoming of simple magic and ritual forms of religious experience as the major mode by which humans related to the "other" world, then we must conclude that the nomads with their Little Tradition, even when they converted to different world religions and accepted in principle the Great Tradition, did not overcome completely their popular, folk religious beliefs and their former religious experience and practice. This experience and practice were well adapted to their nomadic way of life and to what Ernest Gellner (1981:29ff.) defines as their "tribal" existence. They did not have sufficient opportunities for overcoming these factors while they remained nomads.

No tendencies towards more scripturalist, fundamentalist, or rigorous forms of the world religions can be traced amongst the nomads of the Steppe, even after their conversions to these religions. Spiritual middlemen and mediators, very often of sedentary origin, functionally somehow replaced their pagan counterparts and played a conspicuous role in their religious life, while many old beliefs and practices continued to exist, sometimes only in a slightly modified way.

During the years of my fieldwork in Central Asia, I had many chances to observe a folk Islam which was practiced by those who in the recent past had maintained a nomadic way of life. Although these peoples consider themselves devout Muslims, they seldom worship, drink vodka, believe in shamans, and are doing many other things that would horrify any urban ulama.

Second, the nomads of the Eurasian steppes maintained their contacts with various sedentary societies, and had the opportunity to become acquainted with different religions. No single religion exercised a monopoly over the Steppe and the adjacent areas, unlike the one established all over the Near and Middle East since the times of the

Caliphate. The steppe nomads enjoyed a certain freedom of choice. Moreover, as I already mentioned they did not choose religions once and for all, but occasionally replaced them. Nevertheless, the choosing and changing of religions by the nomads resulted not only in socio-political, but also in some serious cultural consequences including a definite cultural orientation and selection of specific cultural influences. A common religion implied a common symbolic code shared with other bodies of co-religionists, through which messages signifying new values and meanings could be delivered. This situation explains to a large extent why during the Middle Ages the nomadic steppe cultures became much less homogeneous than they had been in ancient times and in the early medieval period. The religious diversity in the Steppe resulted in the diversity of literacies, writings, scripts, artistic styles, fashions, and so on.

Third, the nomads converted more out of mundane than spiritual considerations. Indeed, religious propaganda or genuine proselytism cannot be ruled out completely. However, such cases seem to have been only of secondary importance, and even they often went along with sound political sense.

It is not accidental, therefore, that as a general rule, the first to adopt a new religion in nomadic societies were the rulers and aristocracy. They not only controlled the relations of the ordinary nomads with the sedentary societies but had a major stake in them in order to maintain and strengthen their social standing. By virtue of their leading positions in society, they were more open to outside religious influences; at the same time they better understood the changes taking place in the political situation and the new possibilities, or even the necessity, of adjustment and readjustment. Mass conversion of ordinary nomads usually took place only after the conversion of nomadic élites. Not infrequently, a process of further conversion was not easy and took a long time.

In 528, a chief of the Huns that roamed in the Azov steppes visited Constantinople and was converted to Christianity by the emperor Justinian. When the neophyte possessed by zealous fervor returned to his steppes, he tried to convert his tribesmen and destroyed silver idols worshipped by the Huns. Further events remind us of the fate of the Scythian king Skilas a millennium earlier. The Huns revolted and killed the unlucky proselyte (Artamonov, 1962:89).

To give another example I will refer to an event that happened many centuries later. In 1313, Uzbeg, the khan of the Golden Horde, suggested

to his nomadic subjects that they accept Islam. They answered: "You have a right to expect obedience and submissiveness from us, but our creed and faith are not your business" (Tizengauzen, 1941:100, 141). In the end khan Uzbeg succeeded, but not without many difficulties.

Fourth, the initial conversion of the nomads to the world religions was much more connected with external than internal conditions, primarily with regard to the whole complex of their political, economic and cultural interrelations with the sedentary societies. It was specific political factors that, more than any other, propelled the nomads to convert. The most common ones influencing the choice of a world religion were the oppositions to certain sedentary states and societies (sometimes also to other nomadic polities) and adjustments to them. The most remarkable cases of opposition are the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism and of the Uighurs to Manichaeism.

Curiously enough, details and even the date of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism are more obscure than its underlying reasons. This conversion was definitely something of a declaration of political and ideological independence of their state from the two major rival and partner states: the Muslim Caliphate and Christian Byzantium. It also was a confirmation of a claim of superpower imperial status, that had already been revealed in the title of their ruler – "a qaghan" (Golden, 1980:15, 39ff.).

In the seventh century, the Khazar state achieved independence (Dunlop, 1954:32-33; Artamonov, 1962:17off.), and soon became the main political force in the Caucasus and in the steppes to the north of the Black Sea. Soon afterwards, the Khazars were involved in wars with the Arabs which lasted more than a century. In the end, the Arabs managed to force them out from the Trans-Caucasia, but the Khazars were strong enough to check their further advance. The Arabs were never able to conquer the Northern Caucasus, not to speak about Eastern Europe.

Obviously, the Jewish influence began to be felt in Khazaria rather early, and the Khazar ruling stratum became acquainted with Judaism and began to reveal some sympathy towards it not later than the beginning of the eighth century (Dunlop, 1954:170; Artamonov, 1962:276).

The Jewish communities in the area can be traced to the first century A.D. (Struve et al., 1965:77, 79-81, 428, 443, 658). Several authors, particularly Theophanes and Ibn al-Faqih, mentioned the existence of Jewish settlements in the Crimea and in the North-West Caucasus in the early

medieval period. "The Cambridge document" narrates, albeit in a semi-legendary form, about Jews that arrived in Khazaria at an early date, apparently from Armenia, and later merged with the native population (Dunlop, 1954:157). It is possible that some of the Jews persecuted in Byzantium during a campaign of compulsory conversion to Christianity, that emperor Leo II the Isaurian initiated in the beginning of the twenties of the eighth century, also came and settled in Khazaria.

In 737, the Khazars were temporarily defeated by the famous Arab general Marwan and the qaghan was forced to agree to profess Islam. Very soon, however, only three years afterwards, he terminated his brief acceptance of this religion and obviously made some declarative gestures towards Judaism (Dunlop, 1954:84-85). Perhaps this action was preceded by a deliberately organized disputation, the results of which were not too difficult to predict.² The symbolic meaning of all these actions is quite evident, but in practical terms this first stage of the Khazars' conversion had only limited importance and was not even reflected in the Arab sources.

About two generations later, during the reign of the caliph Harun ar-Rashid (786-809), apparently circa 800, Rabbinical Judaism was, if not introduced, then strengthened in Khazaria. Under qaghan Obadiah synagogues and schools were built in Khazaria, and the Khazars became familiar with the Torah, Mishnah and Talmud, and the liturgy (Dunlop, 1954:148). Judaism, from being the religion of the ruling dynasty, became the state religion in Khazaria. This time, the event received due attention by the Arab and Persian authors.

The acceptance of Judaism by the Khazars concerned not only the Caliphate, but Byzantium as well. The relations between Byzantium and Khazaria generally remained friendly during most periods of the Khazar history. At first, in the sixth and the seventh centuries, the Khazars were an important ally of the Empire against Sassanian Iran, and in the seventh and the eighth centuries, against the Caliphate; later it became a dike that blocked the nomads' way to the borders of the Empire. However, there were also periods of tension, competition and even wars.

About 860 Byzantium attempted to convert the Khazars to Christianity, and the famous Constantine (Cyril), the future Apostle of the Slavs, was sent to Khazaria with a special mission. Another disputation followed in which, according to the Byzantine sources, the Christian protagonist gained a victory over a Jew. However, the mission

itself failed (Artamonov, 1962:331-335). Moreover, during the periodic persecutions of the Jews in Byzantium many of them took flight and were welcome in Khazaria (Dunlop, 1954:89-90).

Apart from desired religious independence, which was quite important in international relations, through conversion to Judaism the Khazar government appealed to Jewish merchants, scholars and craftsmen within and outside Khazaria, reaping many benefits from their activities and international contacts, and relying upon their loyalty.

The prosperity of later Khazaria to a large extent depended on its favorable position on international trade-routes (Minorsky, 1937:162). Among other factors, this explains why other religions had the liberty of profession in the Qaghanate. One may doubt that the Judaism in Khazaria was even propagandized, considering its generally non-missionary character and a lack of proselytizing zeal.

Nevertheless, in accordance with the spirit of the time, religious differences acquired strong political connotations. In the tenth century the Khazar government tried to protect the Jews in the Muslim and Christian countries, and answered their persecutions with episodic persecutions of the Christians and Muslims in the Qaghanate (Kokovtsov, 1932:117-118; Kovalevsky, 1956:33f., 148; Artamonov, 1962:363-364, 373).

On the other hand, in the first half of the tenth century the Bulgars on the middle Volga, who were the vassals of the Khazar Qaghanate, converted to Islam and tried to use religion as a weapon in their fight for independence and in their attempts at rapprochement with the Moslem states.

Circa 965, the Khazar Qaghanate was destroyed by the Russian prince Sviatoslav. According to Ibn-Miskawayh and Ibn-al-Athir, soon afterwards the defeated Khazars adopted Islam in exchange for help from Khwarazm (Dunlop, 1954:244ff.). Political considerations again took the upper hand in matters of faith. The fate of those who remained Jewish exceeds the limits of this paper.

The Uighurs' conversion to Manichaeism can be understood only if the international situation in Inner Asia and adjacent areas is taken into account. To ascribe it to the successful missionary activities of the Sogdian merchants and traders (Maenchen-Helfen, 1951:321), or to the personal inclinations of qaghan Mou-yü, converted by the Manichaeans during his sojourn in Lo-yang (Mackerras, 1972:26), is, definitely, not enough.

After the Uighurs had defeated, in 744, the Second Eastern Turkic Qaghanate and created the Qaghanate of their own (745-840), that for a century remained the most powerful force in Inner Asia, they simultaneously became open to different and conflicting influences of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. The Uighurs' power depended upon two main external factors: their position among other nomadic states or polities, and even more so on their military superiority over China.

In the middle of the eighth century, China under the T'ang entered a period of slow but steady decline (Pulleyblank, 1955) and had to maintain, or perhaps better, to buy, neighborly relations with the Uighurs. Only with their assistance did the T'ang manage to repress the An Lu-shan and Shih Ssu-ming rebellion (755-763). The price for this service was the devastation of Northern China, and heavy payments and contributions. Later on, China and the Uighur qaghanate formally remained allies during almost all of the qaghanate's history. However, for this constrained military alliance China, in one way or another, had to pay, and the Uighur often had to extort these payments by force, or under the threat of force.

The political confrontation was soon translated into the language of religious opposition. The T'ang court and the Confucian literati never cherished kind feelings for Manichaeism. In 732 its followers were for the first time officially persecuted in China, and the religion itself was proscribed, except for foreigners (Chavannes et Pelliot, 1913:154-155). That makes particularly significant the Uighurs' conversion to Manichaeism, already in 762/763 (Asmussen, 1965:148), immediately after the uprising of An Lu-shan and the ensuing period of disturbances when they saved the dynasty and managed to bring ruin to the country.

The proclamation of ideological independence was more than manifest, particularly because it was accompanied by a demonstration of political force. The Uighurs demanded that the prohibition of Manichaeism in China should be repealed, and the Manichaean temples should be permitted to be built in China (Chavannes et Pelliot, 1913:193). Nothing else was left for the Chinese government but to comply with this humiliating demand. The ban was cancelled. During the following seventy years the Manichaeans enjoyed the right to confess and to preach their faith in China (Mackerras, 1969:227, 228, 233). The ban on Manichaeism was cancelled, but a hatred toward the

religion that came to be conceived of not only as alien, but also as inimical, particularly at the period of political instability, remained and increased.

In 843, only three years after the fall of the Uighur Qaghanate, Manichaeism, "a barbarian teaching" as it was called in China, was forbidden again (Chavannes et Pelliot, 1913:284-303). The Uighurs who lived in China were ordered to replace their Manichaean clothes with the Chinese ones. Later on, in the tenth to the twelfth centuries, the Chinese government several times confirmed its ban on Manichaeism (Smolin, 1974:397).

The second reason for the Uighurs' allegiance to Manichaeism was connected with rivalry in the Steppe itself. After the joint forces of the Uighurs and the Qarluqs had brought the Second East Turkic Qaghanate to an end, their alliance broke up as early as the beginning of the fifties of the eighth century, and the hostility between the Qarluqs and the Uighurs continued during almost a century. Political rivalry began to be dressed in religious garments. The Qarluqs supported Christianity, although they did not make it an official religion of their polity (Braun, 1901:138-152; Nikitin, 1984:127). The same conflict was conducive to a penetration of Christianity to the Qirghiz, although a part of the Qirghiz aristocracy converted to Manichaeism (Ramstedt, 1913:9; Kyzlasov, 1984:146-147; cf. Maenchen-Helfen, 1951:319-320). Obviously, Christianity played a double role for the Qirghiz. It favored their alliance with the Qarluqs, and at the same time it served as a symbol of their opposition to the Uighurs, since the Qirghiz strove to get free from their power (Kliashtorny, 1959:163ff.). In addition to the Qarluqs and the Qirghiz, one should also take into consideration the struggle for domination in Eastern Turkestan between the Tibetans who converted to Buddhism and the Uighurs. In the ninth century, the international situation in the Steppe, and in Eurasia in general, evidently favored religious cleavages.

There was one additional reason for the Uighurs' conversion to Manichaeism. As in the case of the Khazar conversion, with its appeal to a Jewish diaspora, by making its particular choice the Uighur government appealed to the Manichaeans of Soghdian origin. The Soghdians were merchants, intellectuals, craftsmen and skilled agriculturalists dispersed along the trade routes in many parts of Central and Inner Asia and also living in the Uighur Qaghanate (Pulleyblank, 1952:317-356; Kliashtorny, 1964:114-124; Okladnikov, 1976). Just like their predecessors, the qaghans of the First and of the Second Eastern Turkic

Qaghanates, the Uighur qaghans desired to gain from the Soghdians' experience in literacy, trading, handicrafts and irrigation agriculture, and the Soghdians played an extremely important role in their qaghanate.

Ironically enough, the Uighurs turned out to be greater pragmatists than the Chinese. The ban of Manichaeism which followed after the fall of their qaghanate did not affect them much. The religious zealotry with which they confessed this religion vanished as soon as their political situation drastically changed and they had to leave Mongolia.

Their consequent history demonstrates a remarkable example of another religious policy practiced by the nomads of the Eurasian steppes – a policy of adjustment. After the fall of their qaghanate some of the Uighur groups migrated to the Turfan basin in the northern part of Eastern Turkestan (Maliavkin, 1972), and, in 866, established there a new principedom that existed until the middle of the thirteenth century (Maliavkin, 1983:131, 226). In the oases of Turfan, the Uighurs met with an old sedentary civilization and began to mix with a multiethnic and multilingual population, the majority of which was Buddhist. The newcomers had to find a common language with the sedentaries, particularly because little by little they themselves began to settle in towns and to engage in agriculture (von Gabain, 1973). They solved this problem in a manner typical to the steppe nomads; they abandoned Manichaeism and became Buddhist. In the thirteenth century Buddhism flourished in Uighuria. Later, the situation changed again and the Uighurs began to experience increasing pressure from the Muslim states and peoples. In the fourteenth century their Islamization began and in the next centuries a majority of the Uighurs became Muslims.

The most numerous, and perhaps the most typical, cases of conversion of adjustment amongst the Eurasian nomads involved their conversion to Islam. In order to maintain steady relations with the Muslims to enjoy the fruits of the sedentary civilization and not to be limited by hostility nor depend solely on the balance of power, they had to be Muslims themselves. On the other hand, conversion to Islam was relatively easy for the nomads for it did not endanger their political order. It was not connected with the necessity to join an alien society and to sedentarize, nor with the necessity to adopt with a new religion a new cultural and ethnic identity. Formal adherence to Islam and a nominal acceptance of the faith was all that was demanded from them, at any rate at the beginning.

Some scholars have already noted that the process of Islamization in Anatolia, Bengal, Java and West Africa was hardly a breach with past traditions, and pre-Islamic customs and beliefs survived (Levtzion, 1979:19).

The situation was generally the same with the nomads of the Eurasian steppes. Among many other things it can be testified to by the so-called pre-Islamic "survivals" that constituted, and not infrequently still constitute, an important part in the beliefs of nomads, or former nomads, in Central and Inner Asia (*Domusul'manskie verovaniia i obriady v Srednei Azii*, 1975; *Drevnie obriady, verovaniia i kul'ty narodov Srednei Azii*, 1986; Basilov, 1970) and in Anatolia (Köprülü, 1930:279-282; Ménage, 1979:60), the region to which their ancestors had migrated from the Steppe. While doing my fieldwork amongst the former nomads in Central Asia, I had many chances to witness these popular beliefs myself.

For comparison's sake, it is worth pointing out that the nomads never adopted any religious and ethico-religious doctrines of China; at any rate they have not adopted them while they remained nomadic and were not assimilated by the Chinese. It is true that Taoism was not a proselytizing religion even among the Chinese themselves. More important, however, was its pretension to be the pure Chinese religion opposed to everything barbarian.

Confucianism, and particularly neo-Confucianism, as an ideology with religious accretions (Hall, 1985:196), also remained completely alien to the nomads because of the inherent assumption of Chinese superiority (Fairbank, 1968:5). From political and military points of view, China, in several periods of its history, was forced to recognize neighboring nomadic peoples as equal adversaries, and in certain periods as her own rulers, but it never recognized them as equal cultural partners.

Even when an opposite ideological tendency existed in China, which claimed that there were no innate differences between the Chinese and the barbarians, it reached only one conclusion from this assumption: a barbarian that found himself in Chinese surroundings at one time would be able to merge with them and to learn their language and way of life (Kriukov, Maliavin, Sofronov, 1984:266-268).

The problem was confined not only to the notion of Chinese superiority but also to the specific role that religion played in the Chinese state and society. In China, religion did not have a significant independent existence (Yang, 1967:294-5). In contrast to Europe and the Middle

East, in China the socialization of statehood proved to be superior to the socialization of the religious system. One religion or another was chosen by the state in China not as a unique doctrine excluding all others but only as an object which for the moment must deserve imperial patronage.

As a consequence, the nomads living in the border-areas of China, and even in China proper, felt a lesser need to accept its religions than those living in other parts of the world, since there was no institutionalized denomination in China, or, more precisely, there was no orthodoxy in the medieval European or Middle Eastern sense. The pluralism of religious systems existing in China, the presence of three "organized" religions (Confucianism, ~~Judaism~~ ^{Taoism} and Buddhism) alongside a score of other beliefs which in various periods were accepted either officially or practically, or were simply tolerated – all that made the dichotomy of religious confrontation versus religious adjustment, which the nomads faced in their relations to China, radically different from that in other regions.

If the policy of religious confrontation implied conversion to a religion which then happened to be officially rejected in China, then adjustment required much more than just the acceptance of one of the religions popular in China. One would also have to accept the traditional Chinese system of values which was incompatible with the nomadic way of life.

There was another factor of a specifically political nature which made it difficult to accept Chinese religious systems even for those nomads who would conquer them later and move, totally or in part, into her territory. Historical reality had repeatedly demonstrated to various nomadic dynasties that the optimal, perhaps the only possible way to govern China would be to divide the rule over the Chinese population and their fellow-tribesmen. This was practiced on a particularly wide scale by various dynasties of Manchurian descent. This resulted in a dual organization where the Chinese bureaucracy was backed by the tribal armies, and limited even further the ordinary nomads' need to adopt the Chinese religious system, even when the dynasty, trying to become more appealing to its conquered subjects, leaned towards Confucianism (Khitans, Jurchens, Manchus).

Under the circumstances, the only remaining way for the nomads to adopt Chinese religions was their Sinicization, which inevitably meant denomadization accompanied by the erosion of the base that served as a social and military foundation for the conquest dynasty. Chinese

religions repelled the nomads not only because they were alien and inconsistent with the nomadic way of life. The main reason was that these religions were politically useless and even dangerous to the nomads, since their conversion meant they would lose their privileged position in the Chinese society. Thus the nomads neither displayed the desire nor had the favorable opportunities for absorbing Chinese values and becoming, culturally and ethnically, Chinese.

Dynasties of nomadic descent that experimented with the dual system of government faced a constant problem: insufficient Sinicization made them unacceptable to the Chinese, while excessive Sinicization left them without the support of the non-Chinese, nomadic sector of the system. As a result, structural and ideological tension within the system was unavoidable.

At best, the nomads could adopt, or favored, Buddhism which was rather widespread in China, but nevertheless was never considered there as an indigenous religion. In China anti-foreign and nationalistic sentiments often had anti-Buddhist connotations. The nomads themselves understood this quite well. It is remarkable that unlike some native dynasties no one conquest dynasty in China persecuted Buddhism and many of them followed the example of Türk qaghans and patronized this religion. When A-pao-chi, the founder of the Khitan Liao empire, declared in 916 his good will towards Buddhism, he motivated it in the following remarkable way: "Buddhism is not a Chinese religion" (Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, 1949:293).

Remarkably enough, Christians were also unsuccessful in their efforts to baptize the nomads, in spite of the numerous attempts made by the Constantinople Patriarchs, the Roman Popes, and particularly by the Nestorians. It seems to me that one of the main reasons for their failure was connected with their claims on the supremacy over temporal and ecclesiastical authorities of the converts. The nomadic rulers were afraid that the conversion to Christianity would put their independence in danger.

The situation with Islam was quite different. To adopt it the nomads did not have to change their ethnic affiliation and to become assimilated by the sedentaries, nor to change their nomadic way of life. The Muslims in their demands were much more moderate than the Chinese. Nevertheless it took time for Islam to become acceptable to the nomads in the Eurasian steppes. For a long time it made very slow progress, and for many reasons failed to grip their souls. First, Islam was brought to the area as a religion of the Arab adversaries of

the Turkic nomads, and as long as the struggle for dominance in Maveraunnahr and adjacent sedentary regions continued, it remained to them the religion of the enemies.

Warriors for the faith practically failed to convert the Steppe. The Muslims were incapable of imposing Islam on the nomads by force, at any rate until some of the nomads became Muslims themselves. Various requirements of adaptation to a specific political and cultural environment exerted much stronger influence and became the most important motivating stimuli for their conversion.

Second, it took time for Islam to become the "native" religion in the area. It had also to become its folk religion, less puritanical and more ritualistic, more suitable for proselytizing activities among the nomads. In the eighth century the Türgesh Khan Sulu (717-738) rejected the proposal of an envoy of the Caliph Hisham to convert to Islam, explaining it in a very remarkable way. He told the envoy: "There are neither barbers, nor blacksmiths and tailors amongst my warriors. If they became Muslims and follow the directions of Islam, where will they get their livelihood" (Barthold, 1893:357). At that time Islam still remained an alien urban religion to the nomads.

The sedentary inhabitants of Maveraunnahr began to be considered good Moslems by the world of Islam only in the ninth century under the Caliph Mutasim (861-862). From that time they themselves battled "for the faith" with their Turkic neighbors (Barthold, 1968:212).

The penetration of Islam into the Eurasian steppes achieved some degree of success only under the Samanids (819-1009); however the Sufis who were not always on good terms with the governments of the ^{sedentary} ~~secondary~~ states were more successful in proselytizing than the latter.

In any case, when Bughra Khan Satuq of the Qarakhanids (d. 955/56) converted to Islam and his son and successor, in 960, declared it the state religion (Pritsak, 1953:24-25), these actions signified a new religious policy of adjustment toward the Muslim countries. The consequences were far-reaching. After their conversion the Qarakhanids immediately started wars "for the faith" with other nomads who at that time remained pagan, and forced many of them to accept Islam (Pritsak, 1953:24-25). When at the end of the tenth century the Qarakhanids conquered Maveraunnahr and overthrew the Samanid dynasty, they did not meet any resistance from the Muslim sedentary population, nor from their influential religious leaders. The latter declared that the Muslims are not obliged to "lay themselves out to be murdered when the struggle is for the goods of this world" (Barthold,

1968:268). The most important thing to them was that the nomadic invaders at the gates of Bukhara were staunch Sunni Moslems.

The policy of religious adjustment also yielded good fruits to another group of nomads – the Saljuqs. A dissenting group of the Oghuz under Saljuq became Muslim at the end of the tenth century, obviously just to be able to fight against pagan Oghuz rulers and to render their services to the warring sedentary factions in Maverannahr and Khwarazm (Bosworth, 1968:17-18). At one moment the Samanid government granted them lands along the middle course of the Syr-Daria river on the condition that they defend the frontier against their heathen kinsmen (Barthold, 1956:18).

The further history of the Saljuqs is well-known. Although they came to Khurasan as marauders and plunderers, they managed to create an empire. However, being Muslims they did not meet with resistance inspired by religious differences. Moreover, to the Oghuz and Turkmen nomads that continued to migrate from Central Asia after the creation of the Saljuq empire, the recently acquired Muslim faith provided the legal possibility of plundering Christian countries, and to the Saljuq rulers it gave a pretext to direct unruly and disturbing nomads to the western borders of their state, "to fight in the way of God, and gain booty." In the second half of the eleventh century the Saljuqs' zeal for jihad even helped them to achieve some prestige in the eyes of the urban Sunni orthodox in Iran, and yielded ideological justification of their power (Bosworth, 1968:15).

To give another and, perhaps, one of the most remarkable examples of the policy of religious adjustment that the nomads willy-nilly had to practice, I will refer to the Mongol Jenghizid states. In a period of the single Empire, when conquests continued, the Mongol government practiced tolerance towards different religions and denominations, but the Mongols themselves officially adhered to their old religion, albeit already with some deviations and modifications (Khazanov, 1993). One may sometimes get the impression that some Jenghizids skillfully played with religious competition among their new subjects (Barthold, 1968:481).

The situation changed after a cessation of the conquests and the disintegration of the Empire. As the Empire disintegrated into separate states, the rulers of these states had "to dismount from the horse," if not literally then in a metaphorical sense; i.e., they had to reach a kind of *modus vivendi* with the subjugated sedentary population. The new historical situation demanded from the nomadic rulers a kind of ideo-

logical rapprochement with the ruled, and the best way for them was to accept their religions.

Boyle noticed that the Mongols could conquer Western Europe, and that had they been victorious, "not only mosques, but Buddhist temples might well have stood for a time alongside our cathedrals and churches" (Boyle, 1977:343). I very much doubt both of these assumptions. Apparently, the Mongols were able to defeat West European countries, but hardly to subjugate them for a long time. They were not capable of doing so, not because of an alleged exhaustion of their strength due to their previous victory over the Russian princedoms, as the Russian and the Soviet historiographic myth claims (see, for example, Pashuto, 1977), but mainly for ecological reasons. In Western Europe, or even in Hungary, there were not enough pastures for the Mongol cavalry and stock (Lindner, 1981).

However, if the Mongols had conquered Western Europe, they would have eventually converted, not to Buddhism or Islam, but to Christianity, just as they actually converted to Islam in Central Asia and Iran. In matters of faith they were rather opportunistic. On the other hand, the freedom of choice that the nomads of the Eurasian steppes enjoyed to some extent was by no means unlimited.

It is true that ordinary nomads were less sensitive to new trends in politics than the Mongol rulers. They demonstrated little interest in changing religions. Sometimes they even resisted such actions, because they were afraid to lose their dominating positions over the conquered sedentary population. The process of acceptance of the world religions in the Jenghizid states was completed, even officially, only in the fourteenth century. Moreover, in such multiethnic states as the Golden Horde, it was connected with some hesitations even among the ruling nomadic strata.

The first khan of the Golden Horde, Batu remained an adherent of the old Mongol religion. His son and supposed successor Sartaq openly demonstrated his sympathy to Christianity (Barthold, 1968:484), and, obviously, attached importance to relations with his Christian subjects, vassals and neighbors (Dawson, 1955:124).

On the contrary, a brother and a successor of Batu, khan Berke, became a Muslim even in Batu's lifetime. After his accession to the throne of the Golden Horde he followed a policy of orientation towards the Muslim countries of the Juchi Ulus – on Khwarazm and Volga Bulgaria. Berke ensured the success of the Muslims of Samarqand in their struggle with their Christian fellow-citizens (Barthold, 1968:484-

487). The external policy of Berke also explains much of his sympathies. He maintained friendly relations with the Mamluks of Egypt and was at war with then still heathen Il-Khans of Iran for Moslem Arran and Ajerbaidzan. Berke even declared himself protector of all Moslems against Hülegü's oppression (Grekov, Iakubovsky, 1950:75-77, 80-81, 165-168).

However, Berke did not and, apparently, could not proclaim Islam an official religion in the Golden Horde. Even at his court some Jenghizid princes followed all pagan customs as strictly as if they had lived in Mongolia (Barthold, 1968a:506-507). Many of the following khans of the Golden Horde remained pagan, or were pagan before their accession to the throne. Only under khan Uzbeq, and his son and successor Janibeq, did Islam become a state religion in the Golden Horde. The introduction of Islam met with many difficulties. Uzbeq and Janibeq suppressed paganism, persecuted shamans, destroyed pagan sanctuaries and idols (Tizengauzen, 1884:197; Tizengauzen, 1941:128). More or less real Islamization of the nomads in the East European steppes and Dasht-i-Qipchaq was completed only in the Tartar khanates which arose from the wreckage of the Golden Horde. Adoption of Islam was favored again by the international situation: an aggravation of the struggle with Christian states made the propaganda of Islam and the holy war with infidels more popular (Usmanov, 1985:182).

The religious adjustment in the Jenghizid states in Central Asia and Iran in general followed the already described lines. The eventual conversion to Islam of the nomads connected with the Mongol states in Central Asia was only a matter of time, although Chagatay himself, to say the least, did not favor this religion (Barthold, 1956:116). In Central Asia the nomads in the long run simply did not have any other choice. As usual, the rulers understood it sooner and better than did ordinary nomads, and even sooner and better than some of the aristocracy. The nomads were afraid that acceptance of Islam would lead to sedentarization and they would lose their privileged positions in the state.

Some of the khans tried to favor Christianity, Buddhism and even Judaism in Central Asia (Barthold, 1956:126, 135), however without great success. Others turned to Islam. When khan Tarmashirin (1326-1334) converted to Islam and attempted to lead an urban life, he was deposed and killed. Soon afterwards, however, from 1347, the real power in Maverannahr passed entirely to the Turkic amirs that constituted the Moslem faction. The process might be considered as

completed under the son and successor of Timur, Shah Ruch, who rejected the laws of Jenghiz Khan and forced his subjects to follow precisely all the prescriptions of the Sharia (Barthold, 1963:157, 161). In another state that seceded from Maverannahr, Moghulistan, the rulers became Moslems in the second half of the fourteenth century; their nomadic subjects began to be considered as Moslems a century after (Barthold, 1956:139).

In Iran, in the first period of the Il-Khan state, the nomads actually considered themselves to be a military camp in a conquered, but still alien and unfriendly country. The vast majority of the population in this country were Muslims. The Mongols in Iran started with a religious policy of confrontation. They were not only non-Muslims, they actually were anti-Muslims. They fought not only the Ismailites, but in 1258, they destroyed the Baghdad Sunni Caliphate and were at war with the Mamluks for the possession of Syria. The Mongol invasion strengthened, for the time being, the non-Muslim minorities in Iran (Bausani, 1968:540-541). Significantly, Hülagü was buried in accordance with millennia-old pagan rituals of the nomads: in Royal Tomb, with his treasures and human sacrifice. On the other hand, Hülagü and particularly Arghun, favored Buddhism; the latter even ordered the building of Buddhist temples and the bringing to Iran of Buddhist priests from India. At the same time they sought for a military alliance with the Christian West in their wars against the Mamluks. However, it took Islam only seventy years to again become the state religion in Iran. In 1295 Ghazan khan not only converted himself; he also managed to convert to Islam his court and a large number of the Mongols in the country.

The religious policy in the Mongol states in East Europe, Central Asia and Iran, notwithstanding some differences, demonstrated the same main trend moving from confrontation to an adjustment to the religions of the majority of the sedentary population. The situation in China was different. Although Qubilai transferred his capital from Qaraqorum to Peiking and founded the Yüan dynasty, he was never able to become anybody but an emperor from the conquest dynasty. Nor had he ever a desire to become anybody else. And ordinary Mongol nomads had even less desire to be Sinicized. Qubilai favored Buddhism and thus followed a policy of his predecessors, the emperors of the other conquest dynasties – the Chin (particularly the early Chin emperors – cf. Jing-shen Tao, 1976:106, 114; Vorobiev, 1983:133ff.), and particularly the Liao (Wittfogel and Feng Chia-Sheng, 1949:291ff.).

Buddhism was the religion, although alien but well known in China with many adherents.

However Qubilai and his court converted to Tibetan Lamaism which of all the Buddhist denominations was the most alien to the Chinese, and the Sa skya monks became spiritual advisors of the Yüan emperors. This choice is quite remarkable by itself. In the religious sphere it demonstrated just what the Mongols demonstrated by many political measures – their desire to rule China as a conquered country and to maintain separateness of the Mongol nomads from the Chinese sedentary population (Khazanov, 1984:245ff.). Ordinary nomads in China were not forced to accept Buddhism, and most of them remained faithful to their old native religion. No wonder that, after the fall of Yüan in 1368, even the Mongol aristocracy lost an interest in Buddhism (Heissig, 1980:25). The first conversion of the Mongols to Lamaism did not survive the changing sway of powers.

In conclusion, I would like to note that it is not more than a convention to classify all the reasons why the nomads of the Eurasian steppes converted to certain universal and world religions as either opposition or adjustment. Opposition with some sedentary societies, or groups of population, went alongside adjustment to other and vice versa. What is essential here is that while the main criteria for selection remained with the nomads, the very sources of ideological and cultural influence were in the sedentary world.

Finally, I would like to make one reservation. There are many various definitions of religion that often reflect not so much the differences in their authors' ontological and epistemological speculations as their allegiances to various persuasions of anthropology and sociology and, occasionally, their personal inclinations and attitudes. I do not wish to be involved in this discussion which to a large extent seems to me fruitless. It is not my intention to address religion as a system of beliefs, symbols, cults, rituals, practices, or as a basic understanding of the world and a general order of human existence and meaning. The main goal is to re-examine the thesis that religion, together with other natural, social, and cultural forces, molds the social and political order, while it is simultaneously formed by that very order. That is why the phenomenon of religion does not exist and never has existed in pure form. It has always combined psychological and economic, social and political, ideological and cultural factors. Yet above all religion is an historical phenomenon, because it always exists within a definite historical time and space.

Notes

- 1 Universal religions conceive God as a universal supreme being, whose power is not restricted by tribal, ethnic, national, state or any other boundaries. Along with world universal religions there are also ethnic (national) universal ones. The former are religions of conversion, they tend toward worldwide dissemination and proselytizing, their followers consider adherents to any other religion as infidels. National universal religions are mostly restricted by ethnic and national boundaries; their proselytizing fervor, if it exists at all, is much weaker. Being universal in their theology, they lacked a universal appeal; hence their tolerance in comparison with many of the world religions. World religions are those to which other individuals, groups and peoples should convert or should be converted. National universal religions are those to which other individuals and groups can convert but with difficulties. Perhaps Judaism is the best example of the latter. All in all, the world religions are universal already by definition, the national ones – as a rather rare exception.
- 2 That a religious debate preceded the Khazars' conversion is related by Bakri (Dunlop, 1954:90-91), Jehudah HaLevi (Dunlop, 1954:117), and other Jewish and Khazar sources (Kokovtsov, 1932:77-80, 94-97, 113-116). In the early medieval period such debates were a rather common practice among the nomads, and not only among them. An aim of these debates was to declare conversion to a new religion and/or to demonstrate its superiority (cf. Juwayni's account of the religious debate that preceded the Uighurs' conversion to Manichaeism – Dunlop, 1954:155, n. 113).

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