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Muhammad and Jenghiz Khan Compared: The Religious Factor in World Empire Building

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This essay compares the two greatest conquest movements of pre-modern times, the Arab and the Mongol, which resulted in the creation of world empires, and analyzes the importance of religion in these events. This attempt is hardly in the mainstream of current cultural anthropology, which does not encourage much comparative study of historical societies separated in time and space. Nonetheless, perhaps this comparison will facilitate a better understanding of some serious conceptual problems that both of these conquests pose for anthropologists and historians. The fact that the Arab society had a strong nomadic component and the Mongol society was firmly based on pastoral nomadism makes this comparison even more interesting.

The preconditions of these conquests bear some remarkable similarities. The internal situation in Arabia in the second half of the sixth and in the beginning of the seventh centuries was very complicated. At that time Arabian society was under stress then; after all, new religions do not emerge in times of tranquility and prosperity. So, in discussing the origin of Islam one should take into account conditions in the whole peninsula. For this reason alone, it is difficult to agree with Aswad (1963:439) that the emergence of the Islamic state in Arabia resulted from a struggle between the nomadic and the sedentary people in the Medina oasis. The emergence of a state capable of uniting Arabia was definitely not a response limited to a local situation in Mecca and Medina.

Even less convincing are the arguments of Ibrahim (1990:75 ff, 99 ff), who, apparently under the influence of vulgar Marxism, links the rise of Islam and

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the Islamic state with the emergence of a mercantile society in Mecca and views the Arab expansion as the means by which merchants consolidated their political ascendancy.

The old thesis of Caetani (1911:133 *ff*) that Arabia was suffering from a gradual process of desiccation has been disputed by many scholars. However, Butzer (1957:359 *ff*; compare, however, Donner 1981:279, n. 10) has demonstrated that between A.D. 591 and 640 a severe drought in the peninsula worsened the economy there and particularly affected its nomadic population. Earlier in the sixth century, the strength of the Byzantine Empire and Iran, along with their buffer states, the Ghassanids and Lakhmids, prevented for a time the free movement of nomads to the north (Kister 1968:153 *ff*; Negria 1981:26–27), who were hampered in their migrations to the south by those occupying South Arabia—whether various indigenous states, Abyssinians, or, about 570, Persians (Olinder 1927:34–37; Pigulevskaia 1946, 1964:124 *ff*; Shahid 1984:12; Piotrovskii 1985:23 *ff*).

Much has been written about the deterioration of trade in luxury items as an important factor contributing to the crisis in Arabia (see, for example, Shahid 1984:16; Shaban 1971:24–25). This hypothesis was recently challenged by Crone (1987). However, the collapse of the kingdom of Kinda and a general disorganization of economy and trade in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East (Kennedy 1986:3) by the beginning of the seventh century A.D. should have in any case negatively affected the Arabian society.

By the beginning of the seventh century A.D. Arabia may have indeed faced a certain amount of overpopulation, while possibilities for immobilizing the Bedouin inside the peninsula were too limited, particularly with a decline of agriculture in South Arabia.¹ Whether this decline, along with some other factors, had caused a nomadisation of some of the Arabian population, still remains unclear. But there are various reasons to suspect that in the first half of the first millennium A.D. the balance between the “desert” and the “sown” in Arabia was disturbed (Caskel 1953:30 *ff*; 1954:36 *ff*; cf. Höfner 1959:60 *ff*).²

Under such circumstances conquests and consequent migrations were a traditional solution of the problem, particularly since an external situation in the beginning of the seventh century had become more favorable to the Arabs. Although a kind of political vacuum made itself felt in Arabia, the growing

¹ This is usually connected with, or symbolized by, the breaking of the Ma'arib dam and the consequent migration of South Arabian tribes to the North (Aswad 1963:422). Although many modern scholars dispute the importance of this event, a general decay of irrigation systems in South Arabia in the fifth through seventh centuries can hardly raise doubts (Piotrovskii 1985:36–37, 134–8).

² Watt (1956:167; cf. Bishai 1958:61–62) even thinks that constant internal fighting in Arabia served to help keep the population sufficiently small for the meager resources of the desert to support. See also Watt for a regulation promulgated by a “false prophet,” Musaylimah in the Yamamah, that a man should not have intercourse with any woman so long as he had a son alive (1956:136).

weakness of the great powers in the North was becoming increasingly apparent. The Byzantine and Persian empires had been at war for many years and had virtually exhausted each other (Pigulevskaia 1964). As a consequence, the buffer Arab states ceased to exist (like the Lakhmid state abolished and replaced by the Persian governor in 602) or to enjoy their material support, similar to the Ghassanids (Lewis 1950:32; Pigulevskaia 1964:121–2). Besides, Byzantine was weakened by the strife between different Eastern Christian Churches, and Iran suffered greatly from a growing internal disintegration (Ashtor 1976:10). All this opened new possibilities to the Arabs. However, these possibilities had yet to be explored and exploited in the best possible way.

The situation in Mongolia at the beginning of the eighth century was in many respects similar. Apparently the balance between the availability of natural resources (principally pastures), the size of herds, and the human population in Mongolia was greatly disturbed (Khazanov 1980). At the beginning of the eighth century the number of Mongols exceeded their number at the beginning of this century. While the Mongol society faced a problem of overpopulation, from the tenth to fourteenth centuries, the climate deteriorated (Jenkins 1974). It is no wonder that the Mongols were very interested in obtaining not only agricultural products but even stock from the neighboring sedentary societies (Martin 1950:158; Vorobev 1975:330), but the prospects were rather limited. The transcontinental trade on the ancient Great Silk route was at that time in decay (Vorob'ev 1975:338), and Mongol relations with China were far from friendly. During the twelfth century, the Chin considered the Mongols their tributaries and repeatedly raided them (Martin 1950:57–59; Tamura 1973:9–11). The weakness of the sedentary states became evident only during the Jenghiz Khan's campaigns, after the Mongols had united. In the previous period, the Mongols had fought each other. The twelfth century was a period of fierce struggle, not only among but also within separate tribal units, and among various tribes, subtribes and even clans. Mongol society was clearly under stress (Khazanov 1980).

In their initial stages both the Arabian and the Mongolian conquest movements were aimed at overcoming initial societal crises at a time when an external political situation favored expansion. That comparison can be extended even further. In both cases the internal crises were ecological, economic, apparently social, but in no way spiritual, as far as the nomads were concerned. Both societies were acquainted with various world and regional religions. The Arabs were familiar with Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, and the Mongols, with Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Chinese religions. But this circumstance hardly contributed much to their mundane conflicts. Perhaps a certain tension between transcendental and mundane orders, to use a terminology of the Axial Age concept (Eisenstadt 1986), could be felt in sedentary parts of pre-Islamic Arabia but not in Mongolia. The rare and episodic conflicts between the rulers and the experts in the

supernatural in the Eurasian steppes lacked any ideological background and did not exceed the limits of personal rivalry. And last, but not least, in both the Arabian and Mongolian cases internal crises were solved similarly by successful conquests, expansion, and world empire building. The similarities end there, and significant differences between the two cases become evident. Among other things they are quite conspicuous in the religious history of the two empires. Since the religious history of the Caliphate, described in detail in numerous publications, is well known, I will dwell more on the ideological foundations of the Mongol empire and on its religious history.

While Muhammad borrowed from existing world religions to create a new one, Jenghiz Khan neglected them entirely. The Arabs initiated their conquests under the banner of Islam, "to exalt the Word of God." This united brothers in faith. Jenghiz Khan did not suggest and did not think that he needed any universal message to mankind in order to support and to legitimize his claims, although he apparently held a sincere belief in his own charisma and in the patronage of Eternal Heaven, which were virtually the same. This confidence was shared by many other Mongols. "Together Heaven and Earth have agreed: Temujin shall be lord of the Land!" claimed his supporters. (*The Secret History of the Mongols*, 125 in de Rachewiltz 1972:166; see also Hambis 1975).

Saunders (1977:42–45) made an attempt, hardly very convincing, to prove that the Mongol conquests were similar to the Arab ones in ideological respects, that Jenghiz Khan was, if not a prophet, then a spokesman of Heaven, and that his Yasa (the collection of rules and orders that he left his successors) could be compared with the Qu'ran. In all probability, the main theme of the Yasa was the necessity to maintain the unity of the royal clan and of the Mongol empire under the sway of a single ruler (Ayalon 1971). The Yasa also emphasized military discipline. That was all, or almost all. It is even more difficult to agree with Saunders that the Mongols were motivated in their conquests by a strong religious drive to unify mankind and to establish the reign of peace and justice throughout the world. Peace and order, in no way their goal, could be at best a by-product of world subjugation.

A concept of Heaven connected with a concept of sacred kingship had existed in the Eurasian steppes long before Jenghiz Khan. The Heaven (the Heaven Above, the Eternal Heaven) which protected Jenghiz Khan and bestowed upon him the power to rule over the world is, in fact, Tengri, the supreme but non-anthropomorphous and not clearly personified celestial god of the Turkic (*cf.* the Blue Heaven Above of the Orkhon Turks) and the Mongol nomads (Roux 1956, 1958; de Rachewiltz 1973:28–29; Skrynnikova 1989:69).³ This supreme deity could be approached directly, without any

³ The term *tengri* goes back to Hsiung-nu times, to the third century B.C., or even earlier (Clausson 1972).

priestly intervention; and charismatic leaders were in direct contact with the divine forces.

There is an opinion that a concept of Heaven-sanctioned kingship as it existed among the Orkhon Turks and the Mongols of the thirteenth century (Roux 1959:235 *ff*) had been borrowed from sedentary peoples and was strongly influenced by Chinese conceptions of the Son of Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven (de Rachewiltz 1973:28–29; Franke 1978:18–19; *cf.* Esin 1980:46–47, 94). However, a similar concept had already existed among the Scythians (Khazanov 1975:42 *ff*) and probably other ancient Iranian-speaking nomads. This suggests that the sources of supposed influence could vary. After all, a concept of sacred kingship was widespread in many societies other than China. Nor should one dismiss the possibility that the concept could originate independently in the Eurasian nomadic societies, particularly in the initial periods of their state building and corresponding confrontation with sedentary societies (see also Golden 1982:48).

On the other hand, during the period of the single Mongol empire, the concept of universal kingship sanctioned by Heaven apparently underwent some development. In previous nomadic states Heaven first sanctioned the *qaghans'* power over their own people; in the Mongol empire it gave them power over the whole world. Some scholars are trying to trace similar ideas already in the period of the Orkhon Turkic *qaghanates* and even in the Hsiung-nu period (Turan 1955:78 *ff*). However, at that time they existed only in embryonic form, if at all.

The Turkic *qaghans*, and apparently their Hsiung-nu predecessors, propagated an idea of the celestial origin of their power, their heavenly sanctioned right to rule their own people and their realm⁴; but a belief in the Mandate of Heaven to rule the whole world never appears explicitly in their claims. Although the Turkic *qaghans* often mentioned that they had subjugated “all the peoples living in the four quarters of the world,” they had in mind only the nomads of the Eurasian steppes and in this case preferred to stress their own merits (see, for example, the Kül Tegin, Bilgä *qaghan*, and Tonyukuk inscriptions in Tekin 1968:261 *ff*).⁵

Jenghiz Khan was quite possibly not only a political innovator (Khazanov 1984:237 *ff*) but to some extent a religious innovator as well. During his reign and the reign of his immediate successors, the concept of the Heavenly Divinity so characteristic of the religions of the Altaic-speaking nomads and of the Altaic peoples in general was elaborated as a result of their political achieve-

⁴ For example, the Bilgä *Qaghan* inscription begins with the following declaration: “I, the Heaven-like and Heaven-created Turkish Bilgä *Qaghan*” (Tekin 1968:275).

⁵ Remarkably, the Orkhon Turks accorded the *qaghanal* dignity not only to their own rulers, but also to the rulers of China and Tibet. They, as well as the Uighurs, viewed both their rulers and the Chinese emperors as “heavenly *qaghans*” (Bombaci 1965:287, 291; Golden 1982:45, 48, 55).

ments and the encounter with different religions of the sedentary peoples, both the monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and the religions of China (see also Earthy 1955:228–32).

Heaven began to be conceived not only as the supreme sky deity, but also as the omnipotent God who had an absolute power over human beings and who entrusted Jenghiz Khan and his successors with the Divine Mission to rule over all the countries and the peoples (on this, among others, see Plano Carpini in Dawson 1955:25, 38, 43). “By the power of Eternal Heaven” was a standard introductory formula of the Mongol chancelleries in the thirteenth and even in the fourteenth centuries (Pelliot 1922–23:24; Voegelin 1941; Kotwicz 1950; Dawson 1955:85, 202–4; Sagaster 1973; see also Mostaert and Cleaves 1952).

The concept of Heaven as the highest omnipotent divinity might facilitate a kind of religious syncretism, since Tengri could then be merged with the supreme being of any universalistic religion (Franke 1978:19). This may explain Plano Carpini’s claim:

They [the Mongols] believe in one God, and they believe that He is the maker of all things visible and invisible; and that it is He who is the giver of good things of this world as well as the hardships (Dawson 1955; 9; see also Rubruck’s account in Dawson 1955:141).

Perhaps this development was reflected by Jenghiz Khan’s grandson Möngke, in his conversation with Rubruck, that “we Mongols believe that there is but one God by Whom we die and towards Him we have an upright heart” (Dawson 1955:195).

The meager sources at our disposal are insufficient to allow a definite conclusion. The Mongols’ trend towards monotheism could reflect not so much their own religious evolution but a desire of their observers, who professed different monotheistic religions. After all, Rubruck was a very keen, though biased, observer.

On the other hand, the Mongol rulers themselves sometimes might have wished to express their ideas of world domination in language acceptable to those whom they addressed. Thus, Hülagü claimed in his letter of 1262 to Louis IX: “God . . . hath in these last days spoken to our grandfather Jenghiz Khan . . . announcing . . . ‘I alone am God Almighty in the highest and have . . . set thee over the nations and . . . the kingdoms to be made ruler and king of the entire earth, to root out, and pull down, to throw down, and to destroy, to build and to plant’” (Meyvaert 1980:252). From such evidence one may get the impression that the Mongol religion, confronted during the period of Great Khans with various world religions, underwent some changes in its dogmatic aspect.

Although parallels with the origin of Islam inevitably come to mind, the differences are conspicuous. The religion of Jenghiz Khan lacked any univer-

sal moral and ethical appeal. An impersonal supreme divinity represented by the Eternal Heaven, even in its developing function as an omnipotent God, was neither the God-creator, nor even less the Supreme Judge of the world to whom man is accountable for his actions. This religious did not promise subjugated peoples anything more than a legitimation of their subjugation. It might inspire the Mongols but not those whose lot was only to obey the Mongols. If Jenghiz Khan were a religious innovator, unlike Muhammad, he definitely was not a religious reformer and prophet. It is not surprising then that even his very limited innovations did not affect Mongol folk beliefs and received no perpetuation. The history of Islam was quite different.

Even if those who think that originally the Quʾran was addressed only to the Arabs are right (Sourdel 1983:30), it contained a universal message to the whole of mankind and therefore from the outset had a potential for an eventual integration of the victors with the defeated. It had, or developed, a concept of *umma*, a supratribal and supraethnic community of believers from which no one could be excluded for ethnic or social reasons and into which people are incorporated on the basis of their religious affiliation. Notwithstanding the desire of the Arab conquerors to consider Islam as their national creed and a justification of their privileges and notwithstanding the attitude of the first caliphs, such as Umar and, later, the Umayyads, who strived to maintain the social superiority of the Arabs over the subjugated population, an empire built on implied religious universalism was ill-suited to maintain the principle of a single ethnic group dominating the apex of a social pyramid. Its “divorce from Arab ethnocentrism” (von Grunebaum 1976:443) was inevitable. The basis of Mongol religion made this impossible. The Mongols never claimed that they possessed the ultimate truth which excluded all others. Acquaintance with various world religions prompted the Arabs, by contrast, to deny them all, while the Mongols recognized them as the bearers of God’s truth in their own way, hence their different attitude and policy towards other religions. The Mongols never considered the various religions as ideological rivals, or competitors with their own ethnic faith. They were quite open to the truth of others on the condition that the latter did not challenge their political domination.

As soon as the Mongols became aware of the political necessity to integrate with subjugated societies, only one option was open to them: to adapt to the religions of the defeated. These religions were varied and thus contributed to the disintegration not of the Mongol empire as such, since it had been already fragmented, but of the Mongol commonwealth. The religious history of the Mongol empire and of the various states that emerged after its disintegration serves as an indication of the extent to which the nomads’ conversion to world religions, as well as their choice of a specific world religion, depended on political factors. During the period of the single Empire, while the conquests continued, and sometimes even later, the Mongols officially adhered to their old religion, albeit already with some deviations and modifications. Adher-

ence to the old Mongol religion at that time reflected, among other things, the continuing policy of conquests and, therefore, the general policy of confrontation with sedentary countries and their populations, as well as the desire to maintain the unity of Jenghiz Khan's clan and of the empire in general.

All the first four Great Khans of the Mongol Empire remained pagan. The sympathies and preferences that individual Jenghizids displayed towards different world religions were of a strictly personal character. The general Mongol policy towards the conquered countries was hardly influenced to any strong degree by their personal feelings. Some Jenghizids gave the impression that they played with religious competition among their new subjects and skillfully demonstrated their religious impartiality, if they considered it expedient. To do so was not particularly difficult because in the age of the Mongols, as in all others, there were those who wished to be deluded. Thus, the Great Khan Möngke was regarded by followers of each of the world religions as one of their number. According to Armenian sources, he was baptized. Juzjani reported that on his accession to power he had recited the Moslem profession of faith, while the Buddhists claimed that he recognized the supremacy of Buddhism over all other religions (Barthold 1968:481). Rubruck understood the situation better than many others when he remarked: "They all follow his court like flies honey, and he gives to them all and they think they enjoy his special favor and they all prophesy good fortune for him" (Dawson 1955:160).

The general Mongol attitude towards different world religions in the conquered countries was characterized by political and spiritual pragmatism. Thus, when Jenghiz Khan conferred special privileges on the Buddhists, and later on the Taoists, these actions played well with his political goals. Jenghiz Khan hoped that the Chinese clergy would win the Chinese common people for him and bring him more subjects, and he directly demanded corresponding actions from them (de Rachewiltz 1966:133–4, n. 2).

Even when the Mongols did not use a religion as a mere instrument of political power, their spiritual curiosity lacked any interest in doctrinal problems and controversies. They just took for granted an idea of metaphysical equivalence of different deities and cults (Olschki 1960:153). The Mongol rulers expected positive results on their behalf (divination, prayers for their health and good fortune, magical practices, astrology, and so forth), from the supernatural forces represented by different world religions and their agents at their court, just as they expected advantages from their tolerance with respect to different clergies. The first question that Jenghiz Khan asked the holy Taoist monk, Ch'ang Ch'un, was: "Have you brought any medicine to prolong my life?" (Yao 1986:211; *cf.* Waley 1931:101). The Mongol subjects were free to meditate on metaphysical problems and to worship their gods and deities in their own way. What the Mongol rulers would not tolerate were any claims to spiritual supremacy over the whole world, which they considered as

contradicting their own claims to universal sovereignty and the right to rule over the whole world conferred by Heaven on Jenghiz Khan and his descendants (de Rachewiltz 1973:23).

The Baghdad Khaliphate was destroyed in 1258 not because the Mongols were anti-Muslim but because they did not tolerate any political competitors (Allsen 1987:83–85). Otherwise, freedom of conscience, to use a modern term, was restricted only in cases considered dangerous to Mongol political supremacy or a challenge to their own religious practice. Thus, the Mongols often compelled the Russian princes to undergo a ritual of purification by fire before the Khan's headquarters, and the princes sometimes preferred martyrdom to complying with this request (Nasonov 1940:27). This reflected not so much a contest between different religions but, rather, a political confrontation transferred into the religious sphere. The Russian princes were forced to recognize their subjugated religious status, just as they had recognized their subjugated political position. Perhaps Jenghiz Khan's rule that the Muslims should follow the Mongol ritual of slaughtering animals was influenced by similar considerations; at any rate his son, Chaghatay, conceived of it in this way.

The situation changed after the end of conquests and the disintegration of the empire. Despite some differences, the religious policy of the Mongol states in East Europe, Central Asia, Iran, and even China, exhibited the same basic trend of moving from tolerance to an accommodation with the religions of the majority of the sedentary population. "It is possible to create an empire on horseback, but it is impossible to rule it from that position." This old wisdom, told to the Great Khan Ogödey, a son and successor of Jenghiz Khan, by his Chinese advisor and repeated by Liu Ping-Chung, a Chinese statesman at the court of Qubilay (Chan 1967:119), was a historical lesson that the nomadic rulers of sedentary societies were taught time and again by their political experience. 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, that is, they had to reach agreement on a kind of *modus vivendi* with the subjugated sedentary population. Among other things they discovered that just tolerating the faith and practices of the subject peoples was not enough. A new historical situation demanded from the nomadic rulers a kind of ideological rapprochement with the sedentary majority in their states and propelled them to convert to the religions of the conquered.⁶

It is difficult to doubt that Muhammad sincerely believed that he had received a genuine revelation from God. More interesting is why others shared his belief or followed a new prophet. In her challenging book, Crone

⁶ An additional reason for the change of religion in several Jenghizid states might be a desire to display their independence from the Yüan emperors in distant Peiping. Often in a religious history of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes a policy of adjustment went side-by-side with a policy of confrontation and vice versa. Only sides and political allegiances changed.

(1987:241 *ff*) came to a conclusion that the origin of Islam was not connected with any spiritual crisis in Arabia but rather with a program of Arab state formation and conquests suggested by Muhammad, which is exactly what I had suspected (Khazanov 1984:275). In this case, Islam definitely falls into the category of the religions of confrontation. Although a call for conquests alone, without a new religion, was insufficient to unite the Arabs, in the long run Islam did not have a chance of becoming victorious in Arabia without successful conquests. Muhammad, apparently, understood this—hence, his probes in the direction of Syria (Watt 1956:106; Sourdel 1983:15–16). His immediate successors understood it very well indeed. But it would hardly be correct to consider Islam as a single man’s creation. Not only did Muhammad borrow and use concepts of the other monotheistic religions, but also his preaching corresponded to a certain ideological climate in Arabia at the beginning of the seventh century. It is true that “new religions do not spring fully-fledged from the heads of prophets” (Crone 1980:12), but they also rarely “spring” at all, either because a society lacks prophets or because “there is no prophet in his own land.” Apparently, a kind of spiritual crisis, or a “religious vacuum,” to use Watt’s phrase (Watt 1968:14) should not be rejected out of hand for the sedentary parts of Arabia. That other prophets besides Muhammad were preaching there is worth noting. Some of them were his contemporaries; others, possibly, had preached even before him, at any rate with no connection to Muhammad’s message (Sergeant 1954:121 *ff*; Piotrovskii 1981:9 *ff*).

A difference with the Mongols in this respect is quite obvious. While in the times of Muhammad the old Arab religion was in decay and new monotheistic concepts spread somewhat (Watt 1953:23, 28, 96; Bravmann 1972:25–26), in Temuchin’s Mongolia the traditional folk religion was still intact and held a monopoly over the souls and minds of the nomads. Although Muhammad aspired to overcome political and social, and also religious disunity of Arabian society, there was no need for prophets in Mongolia because there was no religious disunity there. No wonder that the Mongols never created a world religion themselves nor strove to spread or to impose their own indigenous religion upon others as a means or a symbol of confrontation. Patricia Crone says, “Muhammad had to conquer, his followers liked to conquer, and his deity told him to conquer: do we need any more?” (1987:244). Yes, we still do. The first question was put by Crone herself: Why did the Arabs become capable of uniting for conquest only in the seventh century? After all, migrations from Arabia had taken place many times in pre-Islamic history. However, only Islam provided the Arabs with a central power, an essential unity, and an ideology that in favorable international conditions could turn perennial migrations and small-scale conquests into a mighty and victorious movement. With Islam, the Arab conquests from the beginning took the form of a religious crusade.

I would also like to pose another question: Why did the nomads of the Eurasian steppes not need a new religion to achieve unity for conquests and, like the Mongols under Jenghiz Khan, often were quite satisfied with what they had, with their indigenous religions. The same question from the other side of the coin asks why was the creation of a new religion, Islam, a necessary precondition for the unification of Arabia? The answer, apparently, is that Arabian society, while politically fragmented like Mongol society before Jenghiz Khan's ascension to power, was much more heterogeneous than the societies of the Eurasian nomads. One may even doubt that the Arabs represented anything like a single society; at best their society can be characterized as a centrifugal and decentralized one with diffused power and conflicting local interests. A moral element had to be introduced to unite the Arabs, and the new religion became a substitute for a real social and political integration that never took place in the Islamic state. In addition to other reasons, early Islam had to have infidels to help provide a means of integration.

The Bedouin were less stratified than the Mongol nomads. "In the sparsely inhabited and uniformly impoverished desert social stratification remained trivial" (Crone 1980:23). Incapable of uniting into a single polity, the Bedouin were even less able to initiate the unification of sedentary and nomadic components of Arabian society. Islam provided the necessary cohesiveness and facilitated incorporation of the Bedouin into a supratribal unity. Muhammad overcame divisive tribal loyalties by developing a new concept of political identity and by creating a much higher and holier loyalty to his creed. Several scholars (see, for example, Watt 1953:153; Aswad 1963:420; Donner 1981:8; Cook 1986:480) have already pointed out that the original Islam was not only a new ideology but also a leverage for sociopolitical integration. Islam provided Arabian society not only with the concept of God as creator, ruler, and judge of the world but also with the larger moral community of the faithful that assumed a higher authority over rival kinship-based and bounded groups. No wonder that in the original Islam supreme political and religious authorities were fused. Abu Bakr was proclaimed the "successor to the Apostle to God" and at the same time the "commander of the faithful" (Kennedy 1986:52). Jenghiz Khan, who faced similar problems, solved them in a different way. He destroyed the upper segments of the Mongol tribal organization, physically exterminated a significant part of the traditional nomadic aristocracy, and channeled the Mongols' loyalty to himself and to his royal clan (Khazanov 1984:237-9).

The religious histories of the Arab and the Mongol empires were completely different from the outset. Some of these differences can be connected with conspicuous differences between Arab society of the early seventh century and Mongol society of the early thirteenth century. The ratio of sedentary

and nomadic populations in Arabia is not clear (for different opinions, see Donner 1981:11; Kennedy 1986:21), but the sedentary people there were quite numerous. The Mongols were pure pastoral nomads.

In Arabia the Bedouin and the sedentary people were linked to each other within a framework of a single linguistic and cultural idiom. Institutions like the *hums*, or the *haram* (the sacred enclaves, sanctuary areas), cults like the Kaaba, and alliances like the *hilf* fulfilled certain integrative functions for both segments of Arabian society (Kister 1965:116 ff; Sergeant 1962:41 ff; Donner 1981:28, 34–37; Ibrahim 1990:52–53). The Mongol nomads opposed the sedentary people in every way—linguistically, culturally, ethnically, religiously, politically—as the latter lived only outside Mongolia.

In Arabia both components of the society, nomadic and sedentary, were tribal (Donner 1981:22). In Mongolia only one nomadic component was present. It was also tribal, but neighboring sedentary societies were not. In Arabia different elites coexisted, though not all of them demonstrated a high level of congruity (Fabiatti 1988); and there were different foci of power. In addition to a nomadic aristocracy and to a merchant and financial elite in Mecca and Taif (Ibrahim 1982), there was a kind of religious aristocracy, separate and sufficiently independent from the nomadic aristocracy, though sometimes connected with it by some common interests (Serjeant 1962:41). In Mongolia there was only one, but congruent, elite. Experts in the supernatural there operated strictly within this homogeneous, tribal, nomadic society, and in no way contributed to its unity.

These initial differences led to quite different results. Islam rearranged the previously existing social order and intergroup relations first in Arabia and then in the conquered countries. The Arabs created an empire based on the new militant religion and on their declared goal of spreading this religion. Although the early Islamic leadership consisted of the sedentary people of the Hijaz (Donner 1981:78; Kennedy 1986:58) and the Umayyad caliphate was, in Wellhausen's words, "Das arabische Reich," in theory any Muslim was superior in status to any non-Muslim (Donner 1981:77) and all Muslims should be equal. This eventually permitted elevating the status of the second-class, non-Arab Muslims (*mawālī*).

After its de-Arabization, Islam facilitated the creation of multi-ethnic elites from among Arabs, Iranians, and a little later, Turks. For a time these elites were interested in the perpetuation of the Caliphate, and even more so and much longer, of the Muslim Commonwealth. From the tenth century, the Buyids, Ghaznavids, Saljuqs, Ayybids, and Mamluks nominally recognized the supremacy of the Caliphate, which provided a religious legitimacy to their own power (Piotrovskii 1984:178). A caliph remained a symbolic leader of the *umma*. The Mongols also built an empire, but its only declared goal was to bring the world under the sway of the Golden clan of Jenghiz Khan. Only in the process of empire-building did they discover the importance of the reli-

gious factor. However, the Mongols always preferred to rule alone, and an ethnic criterion based on tribal and clan affiliations and loyalties continued to play an important role in recruiting members of the ruling elite.

Although the new ruling elite was intertribal, and to some extent even interethnic, as it included some Turkic elements, for a long time it remained dominated by the Mongols and, therefore, rather homogeneous. While the Arab state eventually developed into the multiethnic Islamic state, in all Mongol states, including Yüan China, ethnic affiliation remained the most important criterion of social advancement. No wonder the alien sedentaries who assisted the Mongols in their rule, did not care much about perpetuating the empire. Their loyalties, primarily of a personal character, were to certain Jenghizid rulers, or to certain lineages of the royal clan yet also to their native countries. Many of these sedentaries were, rather, interested in the disintegration of the Empire. The Arabs had spread Islam by various means, including force, but ultimately the embrace of Islam became the most important integrative factor. In religious respects the Mongols had nothing to offer their subjects, nor did they ever seek to impose upon them their indigenous religious beliefs, which in any case were of an ethnic type and lacked any universal appeal.

Islam exerted some general trends toward sedentarization. In the emerged Arab state the leadership was urban, while nomads occupied a subordinate position. Muhammad disliked the Bedouin and was hostile to the nomadic way of life. At first he even required those who had embraced Islam to become sedentary and preached that the nomadic way of life was incompatible with the new religion (Donner 1981:79–81, 252; Kennedy 1986:48). This demand proved to be unrealistic and was soon abandoned, but Muhammad and his successors continued to view nomads with suspicion, regarding them as second-rate subjects and as a potential danger to the state. The *Ridda* wars proved that they had good reasons for their suspicion. The *Ridda* wars also demonstrated that the Bedouin could not be controlled by persuasion or by force alone but required special incentives for their participation in the Arab state, particularly because the Pax Islamica established in Arabia denied the Bedouin their centuries-old tradition of raiding and warfare inside the peninsula (Watt 1956:106; Kennedy 1986:59).

In the initial stage of the Arab conquests, their troops apparently consisted mainly of settled people from Hidjaz (Donner 1981:119, 254; Kennedy 1986:60; compare, however, Pipes 1981:167–8). Still military success would scarcely have been possible without mobile, camel-mounted troops recruited from the Bedouin (Hill 1975:42–43). Early on, the caliph, Umar, who considered the Bedouin to be as fuel for Islam, raised troops from the former nomadic rebels, and the latter actively participated in the conquest of Iraq (Kennedy 1986:66).

Recently Donner (1981:256; *cf.* also Bousquet 1956) raised again the im-

portance of sincere belief in the rise of the Islamic state and its subsequent conquests. It is difficult to agree or to disagree with this. It does not take a post-modernist to know how difficult it is to read the minds and souls of our contemporary fellows, no less those of the people who belong to different times and cultures. It is impossible to assess exactly the role of purely religious motivation in the Arab conquest. However, significantly enough, the first caliphs understood quite well that religious persuasion and bright prospects in the afterworld were not enough to guarantee Bedouin loyalty. Their policy was to strengthen it with material rewards in this world in the form of booty, payments and other grants, including land for settlement and exploitation, attraction of state service, and so forth. The government encouraged the Bedouin to migrate and to settle in the conquered countries, which they did in significant numbers (Bulliet 1980; *cf.* Ashtor 1976:16 *ff.*).

In the Mongol empire and in all the consequent Jenghizid states, the nomads always occupied dominating positions. Many also migrated to the conquered countries, but they did not become sedentary there, nor were they encouraged to do so by the Mongol ruling elite. In the Islamic state the tribesmen from Arabia were soon replaced as a major military force, first, by Syrian tribesmen, then by soldiers recruited from the sedentary population of Khorasan, and, eventually by Turks. Beginning in the ninth century, a distinctive feature of the Abbasid caliphate and of many subsequent Islamic states was the divorce of the military elite from the rest of society (Crone 1980; Pipes 1981; Kennedy 1986:160). As a result, the Bedouin lost their military importance. By contrast, in all Jenghizid states, and even in many of their successors like the Timurid state, the military elite always consisted of the nomads and was always closely connected with the rulers by ethnic and tribal ties.

The Arabs initiated the emergence of a new civilization. The Mongol nomads did not and never could. The Mongol example only confirms that a nomadic society is incapable of creating a new civilization or a world religion. It is remarkable how little in comparison with the Arab the Mongol conquest changed the religious map, much less the political and ethnic maps of the world. Only temporarily did the Mongols unite different, already existing, civilizations by a Pax Mongolica.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the nomads never created any world and universal religion but depended upon the sedentary societies ideologically and culturally, as well as in economic and political respects. The economic dependence of the nomads on sedentary societies and the different ways of political adaptation to them carried corresponding ideological implications. As the nomadic economy had to be supplemented with agriculture and crafts, so too did the nomadic culture need sedentary culture as a source, a component, and a model for comparison, imitation, or rejection, especially at

those times when politics were connected with ideologies, including religious ones (Khazanov 1990).

The famous dictum of Ernest Renan, "Le desert est monothéiste," is hardly true, and the theoretical premise and the empirical support of all the old ideas about the primordial monotheism of camel-herding nomads seem groundless. One may agree with Watt (1953:1) that "the desert played no creative part in the development of Muhammad's monotheism." Incidentally, the same is true with respect to ancient Judaism, to use Max Weber's term (1952), an opinion shared now by the scholars who in other respects held quite a different opinion on the origin of Israelite monotheism (cf. Mendenhall 1962, 1973; Gottwald 1979; Coote and Whitelam 1987; Lemche 1988; Coote 1990).

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, too congruent; and 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, doing so mainly for political reasons.

Finally, let us recognize that the many various definitions of religion 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 will not involve myself in these discussions, which to a large extent are fruitless. I did not intend in this article to address religion as a system of beliefs, symbols, cults, rituals, practices, superstitions, and so forth nor address religion as a basic understanding of the world and a general order of human existence and meaning. The main goal was to reexamine 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 a 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.

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