

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Mongol-Mughal lens on religion and empire in Eurasian history: An introduction

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(Received 6 August 2021; revised 12 August 2021; accepted 13 August 2021)

Abstract

This article introduces this special volume on the Mughal policy of *sulh-i kull* by situating the collection of articles in relation to broader developments across Eurasia.

The Catholic inquisitors of Europe who defended nonsense by cruelty, might have been confounded by the example of a barbarian, who anticipated the lessons of philosophy and established by his laws a system of pure theism and perfect toleration...a singular conformity may be found between the religious laws of Zingis Khan and Mr. Locke.

—Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*¹

In a word, the question is no longer whether Jesus was first crucified and then resurrected, but how it came to pass that so many humans today believe in the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

—Marc Bloch, ‘The Idol of Origins’²

Keywords: Mongols; religion; empire

Recently, Marie Favereau’s book, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World*, garnered praise in the media for being ‘eye-opening’, ‘revolutionary’, and dispelling ‘the myth’ of Mongol barbarity.³ The reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal*

¹ In Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1837), Vol. 4, p. 249, n. 6.

² In Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 27.

³ These quotes are from *Publisher’s Weekly*, Peter Frankopan, and *Kirkus Reviews* respectively: <https://www.amazon.com/Horde-How-Mongols-Changed-World/dp/0674244214>, [accessed 1 September 2021].

proclaimed: ‘The Mongols have been ill-served by history, the victims of an unfortunate mixture of prejudice and perplexity...The Horde flourished, in Favereau’s fresh, persuasive telling, precisely because it was not the one-trick homicidal rabble of legend.’ What this reaction belies, as Favereau makes clear in her introduction, is that this ‘new’ interpretation of the Mongols is now almost 40 years old.⁴ There had been a similar moment almost 20 years ago when Jack Weatherford drew upon this scholarship to publish his popular history, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller,⁵ and generated much popular interest and acclamations of the Mongol accomplishment.⁶ Indeed, as much specialist scholarship has confirmed—on everything from European intellectual history and art,⁷ to Chinese politics and religion,⁸ to Islamic thought and practices⁹—the

⁴ Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2020), pp. 7–8. For bibliographic surveys covering this scholarship, see Peter Jackson, ‘The State of Research: The Mongol Empire, 1986–1999’, *Journal of Medieval History* vol. 26, 2000, pp. 189–210; Michal Biran, ‘The Mongol Empire: The State of the Field’, *History Compass* vol. 11, 2013, pp. 1021–1033; and David Morgan, ‘Mongol Historiography since 1985: The Rise of Cultural History’, in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, (eds) Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015), pp. 271–282.

⁵ However, his follow-up volume—Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Quest for God: How the World’s Greatest Conqueror Gave Us Religious Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2016)—received virtually no media coverage and generated little intellectual traction.

⁶ It was no doubt on account of this work that this scholarly turn came to inform the general discourse, as was well captured in a 2015 article by Balaji Viswanathan, ‘Why the Mongols were the Greatest Empire in World History’, *Business Insider*, published online 27 May 2015: <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-mongols-were-the-greatest-empire-in-world-history-2015-5>, [accessed 1 September 2021].

⁷ See, for example, Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Hidemichi Tanaka, ‘Giotto and the Influences of the Mongols and Chinese on His Art’, *Art History* vol. 6, 1984, pp. 188–251; Anne E. Wardwell, ‘Indigenous Elements in Central Asian Silk Designs of the Mongol Period, and their Impact on Italian Gothic Silks’, *Bulletin du CIETA* vol. 77, 2000, pp. 86–98; Roxann Prazniak, ‘Siena on the Silk Roads: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250–1350’, *Journal of World History* vol. 21, no. 2, 2010, pp. 177–217; Mark T. Abate, ‘The Reorientation of Roger Bacon: Muslims, Mongols, and the Man Who Knew Everything’, in *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture: East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World*, (ed.) Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 523–573; Nathan J. Ristuccia, ‘Eastern Religions and the West: The Making of an Image’, *History of Religions* vol. 53, no. 2, 2013, pp. 170–204.

⁸ See, for example, Liu Ts’un-yan and Judith Berling, ‘The “Three-Teachings” in the Mongol Yüan Period’, in *Yüan Thought: Chinese Thought and Religion Under the Mongols*, (eds) Hok-lam Chan and W. T. de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 479–512; Matthew T. Kapstein, ‘The Dialectic of Eternal Heaven: A Tibetan Defense of Mongol Imperial Religion’, in *Mahāmudrā and the Kagyü Tradition*, (eds) M. T. Kapstein and R. Jackson (Andiast, Suisse: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH, 2011), pp. 259–316; Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006); David M. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Empire: Ming China in Eurasia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁹ Much of this scholarship is cited in the following articles and need not be repeated here; however, one can add: Moshe Perlmann, *Ibn Kammūna’s Examination of the Three Faiths: A*

Mongols did change the world. In global history, special mention must be made of the second volume of Victor Lieberman's magnum opus, *Strange Parallels*, in which the Mongols make a key appearance as Inner Asians par excellence who divided Eurasia into different long-term development zones based on their impact.¹⁰

Yet, until now, scholars of South Asia have seemed inexplicably wary of recognizing the 'Great Mongol Moment'.¹¹ Whether this hesitancy has anything to do with the nation-state obsession of Indian historiography, or else its largely Marxist and materialist approach, or quite possibly a wariness of adding fuel to Hindutva claims of Muslim foreignness by viewing the Mughal empire in wider Eurasian and *longue durée* perspectives, it is hard to say. Regardless of the reason, it is high time that Mughal and Mongol history, and especially the way the two polities dealt with the problem of religious difference, is brought together under the same analytical lens to find connections, comparisons, and long-term patterns.

As several articles in this volume make abundantly clear in terms of the tradition of *sulh-i kull*—'peace with all religions'—it can only be understood in relation to the Mughal court's profound engagement with not only the Mongol legacy itself, but also with all the intellectual, political, and ritual innovations that it fostered. These developments—as other articles in this special issue attest—not only resonated across Eurasia in the early modern period, they also continue to shape current realities across the 'Balkans-to-Bengal complex'.¹²

In order to unravel this profound Mongol reorientation of the Islamic world, Azfar Moin focuses his framework article on *sulh*, the practice of oath-taking and treaty-making across religious divides. In particular, he draws upon Jan Assmann's theory of the 'Mosaic distinction', namely, that monotheism's exclusionary truth claims—that all other religions and gods are false—hinder the possibility of oaths being made across such divides. Yet clearly Muslims had to deal with the 'Other' at particular historical junctures. Moin reveals how in the early centuries of Islam, when dealing with pagan foes—whether

Thirteenth-Century Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Judith Pfeiffer, 'Confessional Ambiguity vs. Confessional Polarization: Politics and the Negotiation of Religious Boundaries in the Ilkhanate', in *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, (ed.) Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 129–168; B. De Nicola and C. Melville, *The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Il-Khanid Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); R. Gleaves and I. Kristó-Nagy, *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Mongols to European Imperialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); T. May, B. Dashdondug and C. P. Atwood, *New Approaches to Ilkhanid History* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

¹⁰ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, China, Japan, South Asia and the Islands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ 'Of course, an earlier date could be chosen—say the late twelfth century, in the sense marking the Great Mongol Moment. But there are reasons to feel, all in all, that this would really be an abuse of the notion of "early modern", drawing protests from medievalists the world over!' Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, p. 737.

¹² Shahab Ahmad, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Arabs in Mecca or Hindu rajas in North India—Muslim rulers found ways to temporally and silently suspend the mandates of monotheism through acts of charisma and sacrifice. But the problem remained without a permanent and unapologetic solution. Indeed, the only way to fully resolve the problem of the Mosaic distinction was to permanently suspend monotheism by superseding both the prophetic tradition and its scriptural law, that is, by elevating the ruler and/or the state above and beyond any particular truth claims.

And as Christopher Atwood makes clear in his contribution on Mongol religious policy, this is precisely what they did. In particular, the Mongols established a system for dealing with religious difference that gave special privileges only to the ritual specialists of each religion, while ignoring the religious identity of their common subjects. This policy had two consequences. First, it defined religion primarily on the basis of ritual efficacy rather than doctrinal truth. And by doing so a space opened up whereby new forms of ‘unorthodox’ cosmic knowledge flourished. Whether it was the development of ‘Three-in-One’ thought in China or the unbridled spread of Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism in the Islamic world, these systems of thought promised a universal vision above and beyond that of religious scriptures, which, from the Mongol perspective, only offered particular truths. Indeed, it is this new post-Mongol Islam—one where the Mosaic distinction had been suspended and oaths to the king were higher than the oath to God—that shape the subsequent articles.

Jonathan Brack, for example, explores how Buddhists and Muslims at the Ilkhanid court in Iran developed new ideas so as to curry favour with the Mongol ruler. Most notably, this competition caused Muslims to counter the Buddhist theory of the *cakravartin* ruler with the messianic idea of the ‘Lord of Auspicious Conjunction’ (*ṣāhibqirān*), which subsequently became central to Timurid and Mughal conceptions of universal sovereignty. Yet they were not the only ones to dabble with new ideas made possible by the Mongol dispensation. Rather, as Giancarlo Casale reveals, Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481) took the Mongol idea of a ruler above and beyond religious authority to create a wholly new model of kingship that wedded Muslim sacred kingship with the ideologies of imperial Rome and Renaissance Neopaganism. This radical innovation was eventually dismantled—and scrubbed from the historical record—when in the second half of the sixteenth century Ottoman rulers took upon themselves the orthodox Sunni mantle and revived the Mosaic distinction. Yet the later Ottomans were not the only ones to move away from the Mongol model of dealing with religious difference. Rather, as Sadia Saeed shows in her study of the Safavids and modern Pakistan, both used oaths, confessions, and curses to not only impose scriptural religion on their populations, but in doing so they also justified the new monotheistic state.

Contrary to these later repudiations of the Chinggisid model, however, the Mongol dispensation continued to shape much thought in the early modern Muslim world. Daniel Sheffield explores the history of such thought by focusing on the secretive but prolific *Āzar Kayvānīs* who built upon the philosophical systems of Ibn ‘Arabi and Suhrawardī—the purveyors of Neopythagorean

tahqiq (realization of the divine truth) and Neoplatonic *ishraq* (illumination of the divine truth) that flourished in the post-Mongol period—in order to conceive of all world religions as variations of a single truth. Such radical ideas were not simply restricted to cliques of esotericists, however. Rather, as Jos Gommans and Said Reza Huseini make clear in their close study of Akbar's millennial history, the *Tarikh-i Alfi*, composed by accomplished Neoplatonists gathered from across Muslim Asia, such ideas were at the very centre of Mughal management of religious pluralism in their empire. Moreover, as the *Tarikh-i Alfi* itself makes clear, the fundamental problem of prophetic religions is their exclusionary violence, and its solution is the Mongol model of administering a multi-religious empire.

While the *Tarikh-i Alfi* thereby established the intellectual framework for the policy of *sulh-i kull*, Christian Blake Pye explores how it was put into practice through a study of the Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata*. Akbar's great court savant Abul Fazl justified the translation as a much-needed exercise in philosophical free inquiry rooted in Ibn 'Arabi's *tahqiq*. Specifically, the Mughal minister argued that making religious knowledge from all scriptural sources freely available and accessible in a common idiom (which in this case was Persian) would lead to religious harmony, which was a goal of Akbar's 'caliphate of *tahqiq*'.

Such work and its attendant 'relativization' and 'rationalization' of religion invariably had consequences, as reflected in all of the articles focusing on the Islamic tradition. But as with the Buddhists in Ilkhanid Iran, the institutionalization of *sulh-i kull* generated the formation of new religious ideas and identities among other groups as well. Dalpat Rajpurohit explores one such group—the Dādū Panthīs—a new *bhakti* movement that underscored in their hagiographical literature the Mughal emperor's deep interest in their own tradition, which was, of course, premised on the new imperial paradigm of philosophical free inquiry.

Such a strategy based on imperial support for new devotional movements was no longer possible for the Alevis on the other edge of Asia, however. There, as mentioned earlier, the Ottomans, following their Shi'i rivals in Safavid Iran, had rejected the Mongol model and revived the Mosaic distinction. Nevertheless, as Alex Kreger demonstrates in a vivid ethnography of contemporary Alevi initiation ceremonies, this group managed to retain a strong connection to their religious heritage rooted in a post-Mongol Ibn 'Arabi-inflected form of Sufism. A contemporary movement among the Alevis expressly proclaims oaths that uphold a pluralistic vision of a 'City of Consensus' (*Rıza Şehri*), a vision remarkably similar to *sulh-i kull*.

Was Mughal *sulh-i kull* and the Mongol model of managing religious difference a type of secularism? To answer this question, we must confront the 'idol of origin', as Marc Bloch famously noted in his *Historian's Craft*. This idol, as far as our modern conception of religion is concerned, is inevitably found in the sanctum of Christian Europe. In his monumental study of secularism Charles Taylor explored its development within a specifically Christian context, especially in terms of the modern break from the Christian calendar and its notions of time. As such, Taylor recognized that the very categories of religion and the

secular are inherently Western or, more accurately, North Atlantic Christian.¹³ Similarly, as Peter van der Veer has argued, “[e]stablishing a definition of Western secularism and then searching for this object in the societies of China, India, and elsewhere does not make much sense, since it will only establish that “they do not have it” or “they have something that resembles it but is different””.¹⁴ Thus to move beyond such binary knots and the Eurocentric histories of ‘haves and have-nots’, we need comparative studies about the larger structural forces that foster such developments.

Sigrid Kjaer’s article does so at the local level through an exploration of the changing meaning of the term ‘Rahman’ in pre-Islamic Yemen, which was Jewish and Christian. In particular, she explores how the same term can transform from rejecting the Mosaic distinction to upholding it in relation to larger historical developments. Moreover, she places the first *sulh* agreement in Islam—when the oath on the theonym ‘Rahman’ becomes a source of contention between the Prophet and his pagan rivals in Mecca—within the larger world of Christian and Jewish monotheism in late antiquity. Robert Yelle, on the other hand, offers a global comparative model by studying Aśoka in relation to Thomas Hobbes. By so doing he shows that when confronted with the problem of religious conflict created by competing scriptural religions with transcendentalist claims—‘my religion is truer than yours’—all empires create a state ethic or a civil religion. And perhaps one of the earliest cases of this phenomenon is that of Aśoka, who thereby prefigures the case of the Mongols and their policy of religious management, and, of course, Akbar and the Mughal tradition of *sulh-i kull*—all of whom in turn prefigured Hobbes, who simply retheorized a solution to the problem of the Mosaic distinction in the early modern European context. And as Yelle reveals, Hobbes’s solution, which was to raise the ruler’s body or the nation’s body politic above religion, invariably leads to conflict with monotheistic or transcendentalist religions.

In conclusion, then, modern Europe may have produced the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ in our time, but when seen through a wider lens, the process that led to this phenomenon was ultimately no different to the religion-making efforts of earlier empires when faced with the Mosaic distinction or sectarian conflict. Indeed, the suspension and return of the Mosaic distinction in relation to the body politic are part and parcel of a continuing cycle—an oscillation between cosmotheism and monotheism, or disenchantment and re-enchantment, or faith and doubt, or religion and the secular—that has shaped Eurasian religious history for millennia.

Competing interests. None.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Peter van der Veer, ‘Is Confucianism Secular?’, in *Beyond the Secular West*, (ed.) Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 117.

Cite this article: Elverskog, Johan. 2022. ‘A Mongol-Mughal lens on religion and empire in Eurasian history: An introduction’. *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (3), pp. 715–720. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000500>