

DOMINICANS IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

THE story of the gallant attempt of the later Middle Ages to win Asia for the Church is so often passed over with the scantiest reference, even by Catholic historians, that it is almost unknown. It covered more than a century; a century whose short opening years of high hopes were followed by long dreary ones of disappointment, persecution and martyrdom, to end in the destruction of all achievement and the expulsion of the missionaries.

The first great missionary movement, which converted the northern barbarians, was the work of the Benedictines, while the glories of the sixteenth century in the East belong to the Society of Jesus. The great missionaries of the later Middle Ages were the Franciscans and Dominicans. Both Orders bore the brunt of the battle equally throughout Asia, but Cathay and Central Asia was particularly the sphere of the Minorites, while India, Persia and the Caspian Steppes was that of the Preachers.

The time was opportune, for the whole of the continent north of the Himalayas lay under the *Pax Mongolica*, offering facilities of movement similar to those of the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the Church. There the resemblance ended, for the gruesome pyramids of human heads that marked the stages of Mongol expansion created in reality a *pax deserta*, whose desolation was in no way comparable to the flourishing life of the provinces of the Cæsars.

The Church, however, seeing that the roads from Acre to the shores of the Yellow Sea lay open for the first time, was quick to grasp the chance. Dominican friars were preaching the Gospel on the Volga Steppes by 1225 (the year following the establishment of the Kipchak Khanate by Batu), and in 1240 Pope Gregory IX despatched others to Persia and Armenia. 1292 saw the Franciscan John of Monte Corvino in Cathay, and 1321 the Dominican Jordanus de Severac in India.

By 1312 Friar John had become Archbishop of Camba-

liech (Peking), Metropolitan of Cathay with ten bishops under him, while before another twenty years had passed the Dominican Archbishop of Persia had eleven bishops in his province; and the Deccan, Gujerat and Travancore in India, and Samarcand in Eastern Tartary had their bishops.

Brilliant as this prospect appeared, time was too short. The flourishing Church of China ended abruptly when the Mongols were expelled in 1368, and with them "all foreigners of ill-regulated morals." But another generation of Mongol domination and how different might the story of China have been!

Though Tamerlane might galvanize it into temporary life and renew the terror of its name, the Mongol Empire never recovered from the loss of its richest and most cultured province. At his death each provincial governor set up as an independent Khan, and the continent relapsed into the chaos from which Ghengiz Khan had so brutally lifted it.

In their heyday of Empire the Mongols may have reached such a pitch of arrogance that they thought themselves the lords of the world, for whose sake the earth had been created, but they were entirely free from religious bigotry. The source of this tolerance probably lay in the amorphous character of their national religion.

They believed in one Most High God of Heaven, to whom they prayed for health, but not for worldly goods. These, their families, cattle and crops, were protected by Natigay, the earth god, whose shapeless image of felt stood in every tent. At his side was his wife, an idol of similar material, and puppets representing their children were ranged in front. At mealtimes Natigay was propitiated with a share of the food, but of regular creed or ceremonies the Mongols had no trace.

For many years before the time of Tamerlane, however, all this had been changing. Father Jordanus tells us of the difficulties he experienced from the Moslem missionaries, who ran up and down the whole Orient endeavouring to win all men to their own *perfidia*. It was indeed unfortunate that the great eastern drive of Islam coincided with that of the Church, and during the entire period of the missions the

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servants of the Cross were forced to dispute the soul of Asia with the followers of the Crescent. In Cathay the destruction of the Church was due to a political upheaval, but in Persia, India, Turkestan and on the Volga Steppes it received its death-blow from the intolerance of a triumphant Islam.

Father Jordanus, who had already spent several years in Persia, arrived at Tana, near Bombay, in 1321, in company with three Minorite friars. They were not the first Catholic missionaries to reach India, for thirty years earlier John de Monte Corvino had passed some months there on his way to China. His Dominican companion, Nicolas of Pistoia, indeed, died near Madras while on the way to the court of the "Lord of India" at Delhi, and was buried in the church of St. Thomas at Mailiapur.

In the southern Deccan there were then, as there are yet, many Christians tracing their Church to St. Thomas, who they claim is buried at Mailiapur. However this may be they accepted Nestorian missionaries during the expansion of that heresy, about 650 A.D., and were reorganized as a Nestorian Church.

At Tana Jordanus and the Franciscans separated, and as he was on his way to Supera (Surat) he learnt of their arrest. Hoping to save them by his more fluent Persian, Jordanus hastened back, but before his arrival they fell victims to the fury of the Moslem mob. He gathered up their relics, buried them at Supera, and devoted himself to the conversion of India alone.

He journeyed down the Coromandel coast, through Travancore to Malabar, where he chose Kulam as the centre for future work. In 1328 he was consecrated Bishop of Kulam, and appointed, with Thomas of Samarcand, to carry the pallium to the new Metropolitan of Persia, John de Cora.

We possess two letters of Father Jordanus, addressed to the friars of Armenia, describing his work in India, and a book of the *Wonders of the East*. From these sources we can obtain a good picture of his successes and troubles.

Four times in Saracen dungeons, the captive of pirates, tortured, scourged and stoned, he toiled on manfully, beset by hunger, thirst and sickness, handicapped by extreme

poverty. In spite of his greatest trial, the fickleness of the people, he claimed several thousand converts from the infidels and heretics. The prospects of the Indian mission were the rosiest; if only he had sufficient helpers not a year would pass without a large harvest.

He learnt from merchants that Ethiopia (Abyssinia) was open to western missionaries, and, passing on the good news in his second letter (1324), advises the use of India as a base for its conversion. He correctly and finally fixes Abyssinia as the land of Prester John, that *ignis fatuus* of the Middle Ages which flitted from Asia to Africa and back with each decade.

Meanwhile his Order was pursuing its work in Persia. This was one of the earliest missions to be established, and William de Rubruquis met friars as far inland as Tabriz and Tiflis in 1255. These towns were in Armenia, but that kingdom formed part of the Ilkhanate of Persia. The Mongol Ilkhans were early attracted to Islam which, having been the national religion before the conquest, continued to flourish vigorously. Persistent if petty persecution, connived at by local governors, was the lot of the Christians until, with the accession of Arghun, the fourth Ilkhan, in 1284, brighter days seemed dawning.

This prince was definitely favourable to the missionaries, and they succeeded in winning two of his queens and his son Oljaitu, who was baptized Nicholas. Considerable numbers were following the example of the court when Arghun died after a short reign of seven years. His two brothers succeeded him in turn, and under them the Moslem cadis regained their position at court. As a consequence progress almost ceased, the few fresh converts by no means balancing in numbers the losses from apostasies.

There is an excellent picture of Persia in these sad days, when the devoted friars were struggling valiantly to stem the tide, in the *Letters* and *Itinerary* of Father Ricold of Monte Croce, who worked many years in Syria and Persia. These *Epistolae* are not letters to any earthly correspondent but consist of reflexions, lamentations and prayers, the anguished outpourings of an ardent apostle baffled by the

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levity of a people rapidly rejecting all traces of Christian teaching.

Ricold gives an account of the different tribes he met travelling the great highway from Acre to Tabriz, and on to Bagdad. On the north of the Taurus Mountains he encountered the Turcomans, *homines bestiales*, dwelling in filth like moles, underground. The Mongols, with their broad faces, little eyes and sparse beards, appeared to him like withered old monkeys, and he denounces their unclean habits, drunkenness and adroitness in their living. On leaving Armenia he met the Kurds, an exceedingly malicious and ferocious race, living like goats in the mountains.

At Bagdad he was welcomed by the Dominican fathers already there, and with them entered into a disputation with the Nestorians. Their Catholicus, Mar Yaballaha III, was utterly confounded and renounced his heresy, was reconciled to the Church and allowed the friars to use his cathedral. But reaction soon set in; Mar Yaballaha relapsed,¹ the Latins were expelled and the Nestorians purified their churches from "Roman pollution" by scrubbing them with rose water.

Father Ricold understood these heretics well. He gives due praise to their strict fasts, the total abstinence from flesh meat practised by the bishops and monks, and their long liturgical hours, but he condemns their esteem for drunkenness (except during Lent) and their easy condonation of lying. Above all he castigates their lax precepts of Faith: "They say it suffices for a Christian that he makes the sign of the Cross on his forehead, faces east when he prays, and eats pork." The last injunction was apparently to distinguish him publicly from Jew and Moslem.

He remarks time and again the growing hostility of the Moslems, and from his personal experiences hardly dares to hope for the ultimate success of the mission. He had seen churches profaned and destroyed, some being converted into mosques, others into stables; images of Christ and Our Lady hacked and mutilated by Moslem hate; church vest-

¹ He is reported to have been reconciled again in 1304.

ments and ornaments put up for sale in the bazaars and crucifixes fastened to horses' tails and dragged in derision through a spitting mob.

If such conditions obtained under Ilkhans neutral towards Christianity and even under Arghun himself (most of Ricold's apostolate falls in his reign), they must have become ten times worse when, after his death, the pendulum swung definitely in the direction of Islam. But it was the accession in 1304 of Nicolas, Arghun's son, that struck the death-knell of the Church in Persia. This prince, from whom high hopes had been entertained, proved a second Julian. He abjured his Christianity, embraced Islam, and maintained a persistent harrying of his former co-religionists.

With the ground slipping beneath her feet the Church held undauntedly on, presenting to the world the aspect of a prosperous and growing community. In 1318 Soltania, the new capital of the Ilkhans, was erected into a Metropolitan See, with jurisdiction over Persia, the Khanate of Chagatai on the Caspian Steppes, the Indies and Ethiopia. In 1330 its six sees in the Ilkhanate were increased to eleven, and three more were added later.

So the mission endured to the end through "frequent and bitter persecution," to quote from a letter of Pope John XXII to the friars in Armenia. Martyr's crowns too were not wanting. Father Jordanus mentions five Dominican martyrs, besides the three Franciscans at Tana. On the Steppes, where the Franciscans were working, Fra William, an Englishman, suffered in 1334, and a few years later a usurping Moslem fanatic ordered the death of Bishop Richard, four priests and two lay brothers. In the same Khanate, where Moslem bigotry seem to have raged the most fiercely, Bishop James and four friars won their crowns in 1362.

The end came shortly after 1400. On Tamerlane's death the western Mongols declared themselves an independent Khanate, and, now completely Islamised, closed their frontiers to Catholic missionaries, thus ending a century of splendid effort.

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Its glory can be in no way dimmed by its apparent total failure. At the greatest moment of the mission there were in the Mongol realm two Metropolitan and twenty-four Episcopal Sees, and the Franciscans had sixteen houses in the Steppe Khanates alone. With such a record the Church may be content to ignore human judgments and leave the final award to her Master. Nevertheless it is to be deplored that Catholic historians do not make this heroic chapter of missionary endeavour more widely known.

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