CHAPTER SIX
RELIGION, ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS AND DEALING WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

6.1 Islam in Eastern Turkestan

Prior to the arrival of Islam into the region, Eastern Turkestanis had encountered a number of diverse religions, including Manicheism, Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity. Islam reached China soon after its revelation in the Middle East and took place via two main routes: the sea route to south-east China and the trade routes of the north-west which became subsumed under the generic name of the Silk Road. Eastern Turkestan was both a target area for Islamic expansion and a transmitter of this world religion into China proper. The spread of Islam within the region took place over several centuries and was intertwined with diverse linguistic, ethnic and cultural processes, including intermarriage, migration, trade, political alliances and violent conflict. The number of its adherents increased through forced and voluntary, mass and individual conversion, adoption, marriage and other forms of interpersonal contact. Perhaps the assumption may be risked that, during the initial phase, military expansion was more typical, while later Sufism spread through missionary activities.

Among the factors which advanced the process of Islamization, Foltz stresses those of political patronage, when a local ruler’s change of religion entailed the mass conversion of his followers, economics i.e.,

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2 Scholars agree that Chinese Islam should not be considered as an entity separate from the rest of the Islamic world. Jo Fletcher emphatically argued against the concept of a ‘sinicised’ Islam assumed to be the ‘corrupted’ form of a ‘pure’, higher Islam isolated from the mainstream of the Middle East. He stressed that adaptations to local beliefs and practices took place everywhere where Islam gained a foothold, and China was no exception (Fletcher 1995. XI: 3).
3 For a good survey of the literature concerning Islam in China, see Israeli 1994.
4 Pillsbury 1981.
5 Nur Haji and Guoguang (1995) also emphasize the many ways in which Islam appeared in the region. This is a more plausible view than Haussig’s simple generalization that Islam was spread by means of the sword (Haussig 1992: 242).
increasing Muslim domination of trade, and assimilation following the intermarriage of Muslims with non-Muslims. The first important political step towards the large-scale Islamization of Eastern Turkestan was the conversion of the Qarakhanid ruler Satuq Bughra (d. 955), and his subjects. With this mass conversion, Islam gained a substantial foothold among Turkic-speaking groups for the first time; there are, however, indications that some groups had been exposed to Islamic influences as early as the eighth century. Nur Haji and Goguang, who argue that Muslims entered the region as diplomats, merchants, soldiers and even as Shi’ite refugees, see the Qarakhanid conversion not as the first act in the Islamization of the region but as one of its later phases.

The expansion of Islam probably slowed down during the ensuing periods of infidel rule; although even then the changing political circumstances induced fluctuations. Under the Buddhist Qara Khitay, Muslims lost their prominent position, and the levying of irregular taxes weighed heavily on them. Following the Mongol conquest, Islamic practices were discouraged, and the imposition of nomadic law brought restrictions: in Chaghatay’s ulus, the ritual slaughtering of animals and ablution in running water were forbidden. At the same time, the Mongols generally maintained good relations with the Muslims: arguably, the *pax mongolica* created favourable conditions for Muslim traders, which indirectly strengthened the position of Islam. A new wave of expansion took place under the successor states of the Mongols thanks to energetic missionary efforts. As early as the thirteenth century the Chaghatay ulus had split into two, and the nomads of Western Turkestan who were closely associated with the sedentary populations had converted to Islam. The fourteenth century witnessed the mass conversion of much of the population of Eastern Turkestan, not least as a result of the unification efforts of Tughluq Temür (r. 1347–1363). It was during this period that Sufism rose to prominence. Between the mid-fourteenth and the end of the seventeenth centuries, the region was characterized by the emergence and rivalry of local theocratic city-states. The Naqshbandi brotherhood acquired particular prominence, although a number of other orders also remained active well into the twentieth century.

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8 Fletcher n.d.: 72.