Christian-Muslim religious interaction 1200-1350: A historical and contextual introduction

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The years 1200-1350 witnessed many important political changes that dramatically affected relations between Christians and Muslims. Insight into the historical developments that occurred in these years is necessary background for appreciating the works and authors discussed in this volume.¹

Political developments

The destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 not only marked the end of the Abbasid dynasty, which had determined, at least in part, the course of the Islamic world for more than half a millennium, but also led to a further fragmentation of the Islamic political system, a development that had already started in the 10th century. New dynasties rose to power – in the first place, the Mongols, who, after some flirtations with Syrian and Armenian Christianity and the Christian powers of the West, adopted Islam around the year 1300 and established Islamic Mongol rule in Persia and Iraq, with Maragha and later Tabriz as the capital of their Il-Khanate.

In southern Russia, another Mongol branch, often known as the Golden Horde, conquered important parts of the Middle and Lower Volga region and raided such prominent Russian cities as Vladimir, Suzdal and Moscow in the years 1237 to 1238. The Muslim Volga Bulgars were defeated in this period by the Mongol Khan Batu. His successor, Khan Berke, converted to Islam, though this did not lead to the conversion of the whole Mongol dynasty. Islam only became the official religion of the Mongol Empire under Öz-Beg (Uzbek) (r. 1313-41), who profoundly

¹ For general surveys of the developments in the Near and Middle East in this period, see W. Ochsenwald and S. Nettleton Fischer, The Middle East. A history, New York, 2004⁶, especially chs 11 and 12; also K. Fleet (ed.), Byzantium to Turkey, 1071-1453 (Cambridge History of Turkey 1), Cambridge, 1987.
Islamicized the Mongol state system by allowing the Volga Bulgars, with their long tradition of Islamic science, to rise to prominent positions.

Despite many military expeditions against Russian towns and cities, Öz-Beg was known for his tolerant attitude towards followers of other religions, especially the Orthodox Christians; in 1313, he actually issued a decree prohibiting any anti-Orthodox propaganda. This policy of tolerance explains in part the unhindered development of Russian Orthodox religion and culture in the first half of the 14th century, especially in the region around Moscow.²

West of the Mongol Il-Khanate of Tabrīz, the once powerful Ayyūbid dynasty, already much divided after the death of its founder Šalāh al-Dīn in 1193, was taken over in 1250 by Turkish-speaking slave soldiers, the Mamluks, who managed to assert themselves as the new rulers of Egypt, Syria, the Ḥijāz and parts of south-eastern Anatolia. This was the start of the Mamluk period, which would last until 1517, when the dynasty was overthrown by the Ottomans. The Mamluk Sultan Rukn al-Dīn Baybars defeated the Mongols at the Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt, near Damascus, in 1260, and put an end to their westward expansion for about 40 years.

In central Anatolia, the Seljuk Sultanate of Konya, established by the end of the 11th century and from the 12th century ruling as far as eastern Anatolia and overseeing port towns along the Black Sea and Mediterranean, continued to flourish until 1247. In that year, Mongol armies, assisted by Christian forces comprising Greeks from Trebizond and Georgians, generals as well as foot soldiers, defeated them at the Battle of Köse Dağ in eastern Anatolia, and reduced them to a Mongol vassal state.

The Christian Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, also called Lesser Armenia, had been brought to great prosperity by its first King Levon (Leo) I, surnamed the Magnificent (1199-1219), though in following years it was forced to reach accommodation with the Mongols. King Het’um (d. 1270) concluded an Armenian-Mongol alliance in 1254, and Armenian armies even helped Hülagu to conquer Syria. However, when the Mongol advances in Syria were halted at the Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt, the Armenians were targeted by the Mamluk forces of Sultan Baybars, who expected them to abandon their allegiance to the Mongols. In these years, the Armenians of Cilicia were subjected to heavy taxation by the

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