SHORTER NOTES

THE RELIGION OF GENGHIS KHAN (A.D. 1162-1227) *)

The religion of Genghis Khan, Emperor of the Mongols, about whose romantic conquests much has been written, must remain largely a matter of conjecture and theory. But the subject is important from the point of view of the impact of animism and original monotheism. Did monotheism precede animism among the Mongolians, or was it contemporary with, or develop from, it. Did Temuchin as a youth have the same idea of God as he had when he died, as Genghis Khan, or had he been subtly influenced by Nestorian Christianity or Mohammedanism, with both of which he had contacts in later life, though he embraced neither faith. For he remained a Deist supported by shamanism. There may be many sources of information about his life-history, but these are not all easily available to students of the religion of Mongolia at that period. Whatever the religious views of his tribesmen may have been, Genghis Khan was certainly the man to crystallize and consolidate them, in the same way as he consolidated the loose tribes which afterwards formed his Empire. My chief sources of information for these notes on the religion of Genghis Khan are: Professor B. Ya. Vladimirtsov’s “The Life of Genghis Khan”, translated into English by Prince D.S. Mirsky, and “Genghis Khan, the Emperor of All Men” by Harold Lamb.

Ethnologists who have studied Mongolian history will understand the social organization of the tribes at the time of Genghis Khan, whose work of consolidation and conquest raised him to the status of Emperor. Vladimirtsov gives us the following details: nomad tribes were divided into clans (omuk), that were further sub-divided into sub-clans or “bones” (yasun). Sometimes several clans would coalesce into a tribe or small nation. The relation of a class to a tribe (ulus) or confederation of tribes (öl), was the same as that of an individual member, family or “bone” to the clan. There were two main sections, the pastoralists of the steppe and the hunters of the forest. The pastoral ones had as a rule an aristocratic family from whose

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ranks came the individual leaders. The leaders of tribes or other confederations bore the title of Khan, or of Kagan (Emperor). The forest clans often had for their heads Shamans, magicians who were reputed to have intercourse with the spirits. The Shamans who were heads of tribes were called beki. Below the aristocracy were the Commoners and the slaves. The clans were exogamous, Sometimes marriageable women were kidnapped, sometimes there were agreements for the mutual exchange of women. The respective members of two clans which had entered on such an agreement called each other Kuda.

The aristocratic young herdsman through many family and tribal adventures, gradually began to realize what he considered to be his divine mission, to be the Emperor of All Men. But to have a Divine Mission implies a recognition of the Divinity who imposes the mission, a God Who rules the affairs of the world and mankind. It would be interesting, if it were possible, to trace the gradual evolution of the idea of God in the mind of this wild young Mongolian, from his first conception of the Divine as revealed by the Everlasting-Blue-Sky, to the time when he was able to promulgate the personification of God in the first law of his Yassa (Jasak or Yasak). “It is ordered to believe that there is only one God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who alone gives life and death, riches and poverty, as pleases Him and Who has over everything an absolute power.” It rather seems that this crystallization of nebulous ideas of God may have been precipitated by contact with Nestorian Christians or Mohammedans. In addition to his Yassa, or code of laws, Genghis Khan also caused his ‘Belek’ or ‘Sayings’ to be committed to writing, although he could neither read nor write himself. But only fragments of his laws and sayings survive, chiefly in allusions by Chinese and Moslem writers.

The young Temuchin’s first acknowledgment of a divine intervention in his affairs seems to have been connected with a mountain. Hearing that a band of Merkits who had raided his clan had been driven off, he descended the mountain where apparently he had been in concealment, struck his breast and exclaimed,” “Mount Burkan has protected my miserable life. Henceforward I will ever sacrifice to it, and bequeath to my sons and grandsons the duty of sacrificing to it.” After that, Temuchin loosened his belt and hung it round his neck, took off his cap and hung it on his hand, then striking his breast, he knelt down nine times and made a libation of fermented mare’s milk. That was at