A RECENT WORK ON THE RELIGIONS OF TIBET AND MONGOLIA

BY

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The twentieth volume in the series “Die Religionen der Menschheit” is devoted to the religions of two of the most important ethnic and cultural groups of Inner Asia and contains contributions by two eminent scholars, one a specialist in Indo-Tibetan studies and the other in Mongolian studies 1).

The first part of the volume (pp. 7-291) comprises an account of the religions of Tibet which is the outcome of Professor G. Tucci’s prolonged study of Tibetan religious literature combined with a first-hand knowledge of the country and people that is unsurpassed among Western scholars; as such his contribution is without doubt the best and most comprehensive available historical and phenomenological description of the Tibetan religions, and it provides a kind of distillation of the author’s research on the subject published in his monumental Indo-Tibetica (four volumes, Rome 1932-1941) and Tibetan painted scrolls (three volumes, Rome 1949), as well as in a number of monographs and articles.

The survey of Mongolian religion forming the second part of the volume (pp. 293-427) by Professor W. Heissig is presented by its author as being ‘in the first place philology applied to the statements of the Mongolian religious texts’ (p. 297) such as those edited by him in 1966 (Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte, Wiesbaden 1966). And because he considers that the Lamaism of the Mongols resembles the Lamaism of Tibet inasmuch as it derives from it, and that Mongolian Lamaism accordingly does not represent a separate and distinct “theological” development (p. 299; cf. p. 336), the author refers back to Tucci’s contribution instead of undertaking a separate description of what might, by way of contrast, be termed the non-popular and non-folkloristic form of Mongolian Buddhism; hence the body of his contribution consists

of an account of Mongolian shamanism and the popular form of Mongolian Buddhism 2). It is worth noting here at the outset that Tucci makes little use in his contribution of the rather vexed notion of shamanism (which, in the case of Tibet, would tend to involve the explanation of the obscure by the even more obscure) 3).

In the following these two contributions will be briefly summarised and certain points in them will be discussed.

I

G. Tucci’s contribution is divided into seven chapters. Chapter I (pp. 13-29) deals with the sīla dar, i.e. the earlier diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet. Although the traditions relating to the conversion to Buddhism of King Sroṅ·bčan·sgam·po and a resulting diffusion of that religion in Tibet are hardly to be taken as providing a historically precise account of exactly what happened, T. points out that in view of what we know of Tibet’s relations at that time with two countries in which Buddhism was established—China and Nepal—the existence of at least some modest Buddhist centres can safely be assumed even for such an early period (p. 14) 4). T. next discusses the role played by King Khri·lde·gčug·bčan (ca. 704-755) as a possible propagator of Buddhism (as suggested for example by the sKar chun inscription 5) of his son, the Buddhist King par excellence, Khri·sroṅ·lde·bčan, ca. 755-797), despite the fact that the determined opposition of his ministers evidently did not allow the king’s efforts to bear much fruit (p. 14). Attention is here pertinently drawn to certain interesting parallels in the early history of Japan (p. 17). The following pages are given over

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2) Although Tucci and Heissig do not give detailed definitions of their uses of the word Lamaism, Heissig’s use of it seems to differ from Tucci’s at least to the extent that for him it appears to denote the canonical, orthodox and non-popular Buddhism as introduced from Tibet (see pp. 297, 299), while in Tucci’s usage the term covers not only the canonical but also the indigenous and so-called popular aspects of Tibetan Buddhism (see pp. 43, 182).—On the various connotations of the different uses of the term Lamaism see below, pp. 309-310.

3) All the entries under Schamané, Schamanismus etc. in the Index to the volume under review refer to pages of Heissig’s contribution, but Tucci does mention the subject (pp. 216, 228). See below, p. 315.

4) A comparable view has also been taken by M. Lalou, Chine et Tibet aux VIIe, VIIIe et IXe siècles, Journal des savants, Octobre-Décembre 1965, pp. 636 f.