





# RE-INSTATING THE HARMONIOUS PAST OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: A STUDY OF THE ETHOS OF TOLERANCE AND CO-EXISTENCE DURING THE GOLDEN HORDE PERIOD

NASEEM AHMAD SHAH\*

The subject of Christian-Muslim relations has been perhaps the most significant aspect of the cultural phenomenon of the contemporary world. It can be plausibly brought out that other cultural paradigms have been, despite their highly advanced contributions in Europe, Middle East, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, functioning against the backdrop of Christian Muslim worldview and value system. The impact of the latest version of Christian-Muslim religious consciousness as encapsulated into the scriptures of Islam and Christianity has been immense across West Asia, South Eastern Europe, North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia. The interaction between Islamic cultural paradigm and the multicultural scenario of the Christian societies has been one of the fascinating themes of the contemporary academic world.

The flag-bearers of Islamic cultural standards interacted with the Christian cultural values and norms for almost four hundred years before the establishment of Kievan kingdom and the Golden Horde Empire of Mongol-Tatars.

The Tatar legacy of Golden Horde period was itself a synthesis of Turko-Mongol tribal identities and Islamic system of beliefs and values. However, in the course of the creative synthesis of multiple cultural standards as fructified into and represented by the Mongol-Tatar legacy or heritage became itself the paradigmatic standard in the ongoing and evolving cultural dialectics of Russia and Central Asia. The Mongol-Tatars being the source of political power soon became the standard bearers of cultural values and civilizational norms. They received the Islamic beliefs and values of Middle Eastern and central Asian Islamic realm through their own predilections, presuppositions and understandings and retained their long cherished and deep rooted indigenous cultural under currents and overtones. Undoubtedly in the Golden Horde period the process of cultural synthesis was fraught with great difficulties, but the creative ingenuity of Mongol-Tatars won the day and what seemed to be theoretically

\* University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India    abuhuma@yahoo.co.in

impossible was translated into the practice of great historical brilliance, wisdom and glamour and after negotiating great roadblocks, the Golden Horde period emerged into an era of co-existence, harmony, tolerance and fraternity. The Mongol Tatars skillfully managed the unavoidable correlation between the compulsions of political power and imperatives of cultural synthesis.

The Golden Horde rulers were ostensibly championing the objective *weltenchaung* of Islam. The mainstream version or interpretation of Islamic discourse is universalist, finalist, transcendentalist and supracultural. However the filed situation of Golden Horde Empire was multicultural and cross-cultural. The clash was inevitable and unavoidable. But both Christian and the Muslims with the help of State apparatus negotiated the process with great wisdom and sophistication and demonstrated a strong commitment to their plural and syncretic cultural ethos. The literature of the period abundantly possesses a deep humanistic flavour and harmonious tune.

The process of cultural synthesis and religious harmony was undoubtedly consolidated and strengthened under the political patronage of Golden Horde rulers. The interaction between the local Tatar-Mongol traditions and the mainstream Islamic legacy that was represented by Perso-Arabic and Central Asian tradition gave the Golden Horde society its abiding values of tolerance, fellowship of faith and brotherhood of man. The cultural history of this period has been largely free of bigotry, zealotry and intolerance. Christians and Muslims of the said period have been great advocates and exponents of religious tolerance and horizontal humanist values. A remarkable instance of this phenomenon/ethos can be cited from the letter that was addressed to the Metropolitan Peter in 1313 A.D. by Uzbek Khan:

By the will and power the greatness and mercy of the most High! Uzbek to all our princes great and small ..... Let no man insult the Metropolitan Church of which Peter is the head, or his servants or his Churchmen; let no man seize their property, goods or people, let no man meddle with the affairs of the Metropolitan Church, since they are divine. Whoever shall meddle therein and transgress our edict, will be guilty before God and feel His wrath and be punished by us with death. Let the Metropolitan dwell in the path of safety and rejoice, with a just and upright heart let him (or his deputy) decide and regulate all ecclesiastical matters. We solemnly declare that neither we nor our children nor the princes of our realm nor the governors of our provinces will in any way interfere with the affairs of the Church and the Metropolitan, or in their towns, districts, villages,

chases and fisheries, their hives, lands, meadows, forests, towns and places under their bailiffs, their vineyards, mills, winter quarters for cattle, or any other of the properties and goods of the Church. Let the mind of the Metropolitan be always at peace and free from trouble, with uprightness of heart let him pray to God for us, our children and our nation. Whoever shall lay hands on anything that is sacred, shall be held guilty, he shall incur the wrath of God and the penalty of death, that others may be dismayed at his fate. When the tribute or other dues, such as custom duties, plough-tax, tolls or relays are levied, or when we wish to raise troops among our subjects, let nothing be exacted from the cathedral churches under the Metropolitan Peter, or from any of his clergy:... whatever may be exacted from the clergy, shall be returned threefold... Their laws, their churches, their monasteries and chapels shall be respected; whoever condemns or blames their religion, shall not be allowed to excuse himself under any pretest, but shall be punished with death. The brothers and sons of priests and deacons, lying at the same table and in the same house, shall enjoy the same privileges.<sup>1</sup>

Today when the discourse of forging harmonious relations among different faiths especially between Christianity and Islam is assuming enormous importance in the face of the perceived menace of the 'Clash of Civilizations' and the rising tide of religious extremism in many parts of the globe, a study aiming at the civilizational synthesis, cultural assimilation and accommodation, religious tolerance, co-existence, identifying the similarities between different societies of the world and encouraging a dialogue becomes of an utmost significance. More so in the wake of great cultural polarizations and ideological disagreements, we need to revisit the glorious period of Christian-Muslim harmonious relations and to probe the dynamics operating behind the humanist ethos of Golden Horde period. Such a study may not only help in cementing the bonds but it would at the same time, disprove the myth of clash of civilizations by bringing to memory the proverbial harmonious past of two great cultures: Christianity and Islam.

1 T. W. Arnold. *The Preaching of Islam* (New Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1984), 241.