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Review of Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*

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Comments

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization by Thomas T. Allsen

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In his well documented study of Australian media's coverage of Islam, H.V. Brasted shows that Islam has received a "very bad press" due to stereotypical representations of Islam as a religion associated with political turmoil, fanatical leaders, and patriarchal social organisation. The concluding chapter by Shahram Akbarzadeh explores the diverse ways of constructing Muslim identity and their implications for the future of Australian Muslims and for Australian society.

This volume makes an important contribution to our understanding and knowledge of the Muslim communities in Australia and should be of interest to anyone interested in Australian Muslims and multiculturalism. The editors have done an admirable job in assembling a very knowledgeable group of contributors. The book is, however, disappointing in one respect. It lacks a critical analytical perspective in exploring the cause of the deeply entrenched antipathies of mainstream Australia towards Islam and Muslims. These have been noted in several contributions but not discussed and analyzed anywhere.

These antipathies have surfaced in public after the "Tampa crisis" and September 11 attacks in the United States. One of the great historical ironies is that one of the final acts of the Australian Parliament in 2001 was to enact a draconian Border Protection legislation. Some will argue that it reflects the same kind of racist anxieties which in 1901 led the first Australian Parliament to introduce the Immigration Restriction Act and laid the foundation of the White Australia policy. Let us hope that the new legislation will not lay the foundation of a damaging racist policy which, among other things, will not only undermine Australian multiculturalism but may turn out to be especially against the asylum seekers most of whom in recent years have come from predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East and South Asia.

Riaz Hassan



Thomas T. Allsen. *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. 245. Clothbound. ISBN 0 521 80335 7. Price: US \$ 59.95.

Of all the attention-getting slogans in Central Asian tourism, none is so ubiquitous as the famed "Silk Road", to which every cultural article from

Damascus to Dunhuang is nowadays instantly connected. In the “Silk Road” scheme, Inner Asian nomads and Central Asia oasis dwellers find their place as the connection between “East” and “West”, between China and Europe. Marco Polo bringing pasta to Italy is another common trope, particularly for Italians, playing up the role of the great nomadic conquerors, the Mongols, in the last act in the long-running production of inter-civilizational commerce.

Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia is the second essay by Thomas T. Allsen, Professor of History at the College of New Jersey, investigating the real nature and extent of cultural interchange under the Mongol empire of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. His earlier study *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire* (1997), also published by Cambridge University Press, examined how textiles functioned as commodities of rule appropriated, promoted, and worn by the Mongol rulers of both China and Iran. Now in *Culture and Conquest*, Professor Allsen examines cultural exchange stimulated by the Mongols in the fields of historiography, cartography, geography, agronomy, cuisine, medicine, astronomy, and printing. He promises future volumes on language study, popular entertainments, economic thought, transfer of military technology, and craftsmanship.

In Professor Allsen’s viewpoint, the primary poles of interchange promoted by the Mongols are not so much China and Europe, but rather China and Iran. Europe plays very little part in his story, not because it was unimportant, but because it was never conquered by the Mongols and hence played only a peripheral role in the exchange Professor Allsen is investigating. Thus, despite the “Eurasia” of the title, the volume’s key focus is purely within Asia. Professor Allsen’s further focus on China and Iran derives from the fact that they shared not only Mongol rule, but more particularly rule by the Toluid sub-branch of the ruling Chinggisid family. Founded by Hülegü and Qubilai, both sons of Chinggis Khan’s youngest son Tolui, Allsen argues that the Yuan dynasty in China and the Ilkhanate in Iran shared a political alliance and flourishing commercial, diplomatic, and cultural connections not shared at all with the Golden Horde or the Chaghadaid branches of the Mongol empire.

Professor Allsen has unusual qualifications for this task, particularly his knowledge of both classical Chinese and Persian. These two languages contain the most important sources for the Mongol empire as a whole, but have rarely been mastered by the same person. In addition, while he does not command the Mongolian language, his first book, *Mongol Imperialism* (1987), showed his mastery of the imperial culture of the Mongols. As a result, Professor Allsen achieves a rare balance in his treatment of the issues, not viewing China in the light of Iran, nor Iran in the light of China, nor viewing the Mongols simply

as conquerors in relation to either, but balancing the point of view of all three peoples.

Even with his expertise, it would be impossible for one scholar to master fields as diverse as agronomy and historiography, medicine and printing. For much of the book, Professor Allsen serves as an expert synthesizer of existing secondary literature on cultural and economic exchange. Presented together, the sheer range of Sino-Iranian cultural exchange promoted by the Mongols is astonishing. In all of the fields he covers, he finds important exchange going both ways. Only by putting together, for example, Rashid al-Din's adoption of Chinese historiographical methods in his *Tārīkh-i Mubarak-i Ghazani*, and the Yuan court's promotion of sherbet in China does the multifaceted nature of Mongolian-directed cultural exchange become apparent.

Professor Allsen's most important conclusion, however, is that this cultural exchange was not simply a spontaneous result of the Mongol conquest, but a deliberately planned aspect of Mongol rule, an aspect perhaps not yet familiar to those studying China or Iran. In Part I, he offers a detailed history of Yuan-Ilkhan relations focusing on how the Mongol institutions of appanages, the preferential employment of non-natives in sensitive posts, the cosmopolitan tastes of the court, and the alliance of the two Toluid states against the Chaghadai and Golden Horde khanates all stimulated a direct Mongol promotion of cultural exchange. Thus, to take the example of sherbet, the Mongols did not merely allow Iranians to introduce sherbet into China, rather Qubilai's court in China employed a Samarqandi Christian Mar Sargis as official sherbet-maker (*sherbetchi*) and ordered West Asian lemon breeds planted in Canton for the first time to ensure the finest ingredients. While listing a great number of agents of this exchange, Professor Allsen focuses on Bolad Aqa and Rashid al-Din, a Mongol and a Persian, as the key impresarios.

Professor Allsen's work is not without its minor flaws. In his discussion of historiography, comparison of the *Sheng-wu ch'in-cheng lu* with Rashid al-Din's history of Chinggis Khan, I think, enables us to go rather further than Paul Pelliot's cautious comment and state flatly that the two are for long passages simply the same text, viz. Sarman's 1287 Mongolian "Veritable Records", translated into Chinese and Persian respectively. While he focuses on Bolad Aqa and Rashid al-Din, the role of the khans themselves, particularly Qubilai and the more powerful Ilkhans, such as Hülegü, Ghazan Khan, and Sultan Öljeitü seems somewhat slighted. In all of these cases, we have enough evidence of their direct interest in cultural exchange to begin making more definite conclusions about the Mongol khans' active patronage of cultural exchange. It is also unfortunate that Professor Allsen seems to have no intention of exploring the strong influence of Chinese art on the Persian

miniatures, an influence well documented by art historians such as Abolala Soudavar and Sheila Blair. Finally, the religious interchange between Buddhism and Islam in the Ilkhanid and Timurid courts and the establishment of a self-reproducing Muslim community in China proper, the Hui, were also important aspects of cultural exchange directly sponsored by the Mongols. While shadowed by the tragic annihilation of Buddhism in Iran during the 1295-7 persecutions and the obscured by the absence of a native Sino-Islamic literature before the Ming, such religious exchange was undoubtedly a important aspect of Sino-Iranian cultural exchange under the Mongols.

Despite these possible areas of improvement, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* is a superb book and a model of accurate scholarship. All those interested in late medieval China or Iran, in the Mongol empire, or in international cross-cultural contact before European dominance will profit greatly from reading Professor Allsen's fascinating story.

Christopher P. Atwood



Peter Gottschalk. *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. 215. Hardbound. ISBN 019565439-0. Price: Indian Rs. 525.

The much bandied-about thesis of a clash of civilisations doing the rounds these days threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with prophets of doom the likes of Samuel Huntington being lionised in the press and academic circles. In a religiously plural country such as India, the devastating effect of religiously inspired conflict are particularly real and threatening. Multiple religious identities need not, however, be a source of conflict, as this book seeks to argue. Rather, if carefully managed, religious diversity can be a source of a country's strength and stability. Never before, it seems, has the art of skilfully negotiating the conflicting demands of diverse religious identities been so desperately needed as it is today.

Gottschalk's basic thesis is that religious identity is only one of the many identities that people possess. If religion divides people along confessional lines, there are other factors that bring people of different religious persuasions together, including shared race, language, locality, nation and ethnicity. One's religious identity need not necessarily be the most important or potent of