Julie Leong

Professor Dossey

HIST 101

25 November 2013

Christianity Against the Mongols

The Mongols are well renowned for their brutality, power, and fear.   Thanks to the efforts of Chingis Khan, the northern nomadic groups were united, and as historians would name them, became the Mongols.  During the 13th century, they were feared by all.  They dominated the East and became a world power.  One by one, cities fell, and states scrambled to defend themselves.  The West soon acknowledged their ferocity and acted upon what would be one of the first East and West interactions. At the head, the Catholic Church decides to intervene and send an envoy of peace.  In 1245 CE, John of Plano Caprini tells of his journey.  From his travels to the customs of the Mongols, he is considered one of the first to document the lifestyle of a Mongol.  In terms of John’s peace offering, the Mongols decide to accept, or at least convey interest, in the church’s intentions.  From a political standpoint, it is shocking.  They had no interest in peace, as evident from their previous conquests.  The little “peace” they do show is in terms of submission, from the other side.  The Mongols’ power was unmatched.  It is even questionable if the West would have been able to fight off Mongols.    This paper will examine what this “peace” meant, both to Mongols and the West.

John of Plano Caprini was a Franciscan, a disciple of St. Francis.  At the time of his writing, he was well aged, approximately 65 years old.   He was not of high rank in the church.  At the time, he believed that he should serve the greater good by becoming an envoy of peace.  It is also noted that the church believed that a humble man would suffice enough to represent Catholicism.  John was not fluent in any oriental languages, nor had he been outside of Europe.  He had very little knowledge upon embarking on his voyage.  His journal or notes were for a written record.  He emphasizes that his journal could be later used among Westerners to have a true idea of what Mongols were like (John 4).  His account was intended to be read.  He was not specifically writing for the church but rather the good of Western civilization.   It was knowledge for the greater good.   Previously, there had been little to no recorded interaction with the Mongols.  It is also possible that he may have just written to pass time along the way.  For the earlier chapters, John writes in third person, like an observation or an encyclopedic entry.  In the later chapters, he writes from a first person perspective.

His journal gives detailed observations of his travels to the East.  First he focuses on culture, which was explained by Christians or other people along the way.  He discusses things such as appearance, the number of wives one has, and everyday life (John 6-18).  The details of the Mongols’ lifestyle show some indication of cultural understanding.  The next section of journal proceeds to discuss the Mongols’ way of war.   From battle tactics to battle armor, the Mongol life is that of war.  John does not make it light hearted.  The story of the Mongols is darkly embedded with conquest and a thirst for blood (John 32-50) The Mongols lacked a sense of mercy.  The final section discusses John’s actual journey to the Mongols’ main camp.  The journey is described as tiresome and cumbersome. It eventually leads to meeting the Emperor and the very first “peace” talks ever to take place.  Presumably, as John implies many times, the Mongols either kill or rule.  Peace is more of an illusion.

John may have believed that he was merely a messenger.  He was not of high rank, but he volunteered to venture possibly towards death.  The ultimate thing that may bash his credibility is the fact that many people had to translate for him.  For example, regarding customs or meetings, a translator had to be a translator for another translator:  “We gave answer that we used neither the Ruthenian nor Saracen writing; there were however Saracens in the country but they were a long way from the Lord Pope…” (John 67).  It is fallible that there are mishaps from one language to another, especially if translation is done with speed and not precision.   The dependency on distant foreigners can cause inefficiency. He has called their actions “savage”, “misled”, or “evil” because of his raising.  For example, John implies this “savagery” by writing about drinking.  He says, “Drunkenness is considered an honorable thing by them and when anyone drinks too much, he is sick there and then, nor does this prevent him from drinking again,” (John 16).  There is an implication that John is not content with this lifestyle.  This style of language is evident in his writing, but interjection of his own opinion was kept to a bare minimum.  Also, he tried present cultural relativism by introducing the lifestyle of the Mongols in the first few pages.

In terms of modern opinions, the author, John, seems indifferent.  By indifferent, it is necessary to look at the relationship with diplomacy and Christianity. It was of high regard to save those not of the Christian faith. Creating and maintaining relationships with those who are Christian is the key factor of 13th century Europe. Considerably enough, it is questionable if the church would care for anyone else that in not Christian. While most would like to believe it was out of the goodness of Christianity to “help” the Mongols, it is unlikely so. A theory could be that the Church was trying to catholicize the world. Most likely, peace was not on the agenda, in a modern sense. When there are two great empires, they must be breathing down each other’s’ necks.

The Mongols, or the “Tartars”, as John describes, are known for ruling the vast empire of the East.  Yet, the beginning of the empire was much smaller.  The Mongols originated in Mongolia.  There were four tribes, and in one of these tribes, Chingis Khan came to power (John 19-21).  His ability to hunt and trap his followers led to conquest of other tribes, countries, and so on.  Importantly enough, he managed to conquer the other largest empire beside the Christians, the eastern Turks (Dawson x-xii).   Eventually, Chingis is made Emperor.  If not for Chingis Khan, the Mongols who terrorized the East would have not been as large of a concern.

After Chingis had died, the Mongols were quiet.  Eventually, the main issue of concern was the Mongols pressing the West.  They had reached Russia, and had cut off a part of the Christian world.  At this point, the Mongols had conquered most of China, parts of India, the Islamic World (the Turks), and very Eastern Europe (John 41).  The Mongols’ capacity for war is remarkable.  The number of lands which the Mongols conquered is terrifying.  Their thirst for blood is evident in their culture and way of life.  It is attributed to their nomadic life.  The climate of Mongolia is very harsh.  The nomadic lifestyle in a cold and dry land is a survival game (John 5-6).  When meeting other countries or tribes who do not have to depend on moving, the Mongols like to fight.  It is also a supreme order from the “original emperor”, Chingis Khan. It was his goal to bring the whole world into subjection (John 43).  The notion of this command can be inferred to apply to any country.  Even after Chingis’ death, this notion was held, as the Mongols continued to be a threat.  For no one dare disobeys the Emperor. There is no one who seems to cross this boundary (John 27). Hence, the will of Chingis Khan survives. The Christians in the Western world were a likely target of this command, considering that the Mongols had already conquered or subdued what had crossed their paths.

The Christian Empire of the West is a unique interest for the Mongols. It has been previously mentioned that Christian Russia was under the control of the Mongols. Yet, it seems that they stopped their conquest of the world to this point. At this time, the Mongol empire is the largest empire in the world. Not even Christian Europe should be taken into account. Nevertheless, the Mongols would have never accepted a peace letter or envoy. If they were truly so powerful, the Christian Empire would have been no problem. Yet, the Mongols accept John, and return the notion of this “meeting”. John’s voyage was a rare occasion. There is no other account in which the Mongols are so “amicable”. Along his journey, John passes through checkpoints, or main cities of the empire, without as much as a scar. Each Mongol happens to accept the concept of John’s journey, and he is able to go through (John 50-60). John firmly believes, “Since there is no country on earth which they fear with exception of Christendom, they are preparing to make war on us.” (John 44). To the contrary, John, who is a representative of Christian Europe, seems more afraid of the Mongols than the Mongols afraid of Christendom.

Christianity is the key feature of 13th century Europe.  The highest power in the land was the Catholic Church.  It was Pope Innocent IV who requested this voyage to meet the Mongols. The original source of this conquest comes from the two European kings who were fighting. The pope was convinced that the Mongols seemed to have gain knowledge of this war, and wanted to take advantage of it (Dawson xiv). Although, the wishes of the church are for the Mongols to turn to Christianity, the hidden of agenda of protecting the Christian core is evident (Innocent 1V 73-76). He says he wants protection for the Christians, “especially from the persecution of Christians” (Innocent 74). This point can be taken as a restricted “peace”. Christian lives would be safe. Rather than an empire which needs to be saved, the humanistic side of saving a fellow Christian live is implied. It is evident enough why the Pope decides to push towards conversion to Christianity. Europe wants to stop the Mongols from advancing. The will of Christianity would be for the Mongols to repent on their actions. It is evident that the Pope, tried to appeal to a humanistic side of the Mongols (if they have one) by reciting the origins of Jesus Christ (Innocent IV 73-74). Peace would be what God intended, and if the Mongols were to convert, it would be so.

Yet, the Mongols converting to Christianity is not an indicator of peace. In all other cultures that the Mongols have been in contact with, the conquered empires do not have to change their lifestyle. Some pick up Mongol customs, others prefer to stay the same (John 41). The Mongols welcomed differences and innovation; such is a contributor to their success. The norm was that all who came before the Mongol Empire to give a gift, or tribute. Usually large and grandiose, these gifts were necessary in order to show good “faith”. The better the gift, the better it was to keep a nation around (John 51-54). It is that having such different cultures and lifestyles enriches the Mongol Empire. Considering that the Mongols increased trade relations, it is not uncommon that they would come into contact with many different kinds of people. Christianity is of no exception. Even the Emperor at the time, was almost Christian by onlookers. He kept Christian clerics and other suppliers (John 68). Therefore, appeals to salvation seem quite useless. Also John of Plano Caprini’s voyage is not a standard diplomatic meeting. In their time, unless they were allies, peace of any sort does not come out of thin air. The main agitator for peace is usually war. John clearly writes, “Whoever wishes to fight against the Tartars ought to have the following arms: good strong bows, crossbows, of which they are much afraid…” (John 46). There is heavy implication that John was being more that an envoy. He was by no means a spy, as he happened to be chosen, but rather he knew that everyone wants to know how the Mongols function. John even adds in a section for how to wage war against the Mongols (John 43-50).

The Mongols desire war.  Their culture revolves around survival.  Generally, if they are not at war, the men tend to do things pertaining to maintaining subsistence or war.  The maintenance of a military is daily life.  Rather than maintaining a defense, the Mongols constantly prepare for the offensive.  For example, a daily task may compromise of caring for the herd animals, but the men may also create arrows (John 18).  They would also teach the children the ways of the bow.  The women are left to household chores, as the men’s main concern is their military duty.  Their weapon of choice is archery.  A reason for the Mongols’ success was their cavalry.  This cavalry was highly advanced in the art of archery (John 34).  Constantly, the Mongols never cease to incorporate daily life with the military life.  It is important to note that the men will do whatever the emperor has wished.  Everyone who is beneath the Emperor will follow as he says.  Otherwise, punishment follows.  During battle, if one were to leave their platoon, the whole group would be killed.  If the group were to flee, the whole unit would die (John 33).  Fear is how the Mongols function.  It is the same for when they are at home.  There are certain boundaries that cannot be crossed, things considered as a “sin”.  Certain customs, such as others’ property should not be touched by anyone except the owner, could be a crime that considers death (John 17).  Death seems to be the common theme in all situations.  In war, the Mongols kill and kill.  Submission is conceived as slaughtering the people in battle.  The act of killing is better satisfaction than plunder.  Those who happen to survive are able to buy off the Mongols.

The only “allies”, if considered, the Mongols have are those who have submitted to their will. There is always a benefit in having a “friend”. It can be said that the Mongols are greedy. They want to have more and more stuff. Consequently, the church knew this. As indicated by Pope Innocent IV, “we also ask that, having treated them concerning the aforesaid matter to your profit” (Innocent IV 75).  The Mongols have “allies” in this sort of way. All countries are received always beneath the Mongols. They tend to accept their position, no matter the outcome. For example, if there are any meetings between officials, no matter how high ranked the outsider is, the national is placed always first (John 15). Mongols will and can place their own interests above all else. In another incident, the “allies” must be willing to take any punishment. It was the case for a Russian man who did not give enough tribute. He happened to be trampled upon by the horses of the Mongols (John 52). The Mongols do not care if they hurt someone of importance. They know that opposing side will not dare to question their actions. Otherwise, death will be imminent. According to John, the enemies who survive battle, will most likely die, a very few will become slaves, or if they feel to instill fear, the Mongols will kill periodically (John 38). Regardless, if “allies” do any wrong or not, the Mongols do not care whether their agreement stays in place.

All countries come to submission under the Mongols.  Peace is analogous to submission.   As said earlier, those who battle with the Mongols will die by the Mongols.  Cities tend to give up, and accept whatever terms the Mongols create.  Yet, the Mongols never trust anyone, even those who are under their rule.  In relation to their constant military lifestyle, certain paranoia exists regarding the fallen cities.  They will make ridiculous demands for those who are in complete dominion of the Mongols (John 39).  It keeps the conquered in check, such is a possible reason besides the finery of having a bounty of goods.  The war is never over.  The nature of the Mongols is to be cunning and sly.  It is deemed essential to fight battles they know they will win, and by doing so they destroy the opposing army.  Always be ready to attack the enemy at their weakest moments (John 36).  The Mongols are quite stubborn, for they will fight a battle as long as they need to.

Eventually, no war will come to pass between the Western Europe and the Mongol Empire. Neither will long standing diplomatic relations come to last. The Mongol Empire will eventually die out, as most historians will agree, due to succession problems. Regardless, it is important to note that the Christian Empire making contact with the East, the Mongol Empire, is the first of its kind. Yet, it is not peace, as it comes to show. Peace is under the guise of preventing the downfall of the Western Europe. The faith of Christianity would not have protected Western Europe. The Mongols’ faith wouldn’t change their lifestyle. For them, war is the only way of life. The Church wanted to smooth talk the Mongols into following their example, but the Mongols had other plans in mind. They do not see anyone as equals. A diplomatic relation is never kept by the Mongols. The Mongols’ “peace” is submission, which in turn provides self-interest. The Mongols like to take risks where the profit is great. If the Mongols cared enough, war is how they win. Christianity, if the Mongols had not fallen, may have had a different turn in history.

Bibliography

John of Plano Carpini. “History of Mongols”. Trans. Nun of Stanbook Abbey. *The Mongol Mission; Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. Ed. Christopher Dawson. New York: Shed and Ward, Inc, 1995. 3-72. Print.

Dawson, Christopher. Introduction. *The Mongol Mission; Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. By John of Plano Carpini. New York: Shed and Ward, Inc, 1995. vii-xviii, xxxvii-xxxix, 2. Print.

Innocent IV. “Two Bulls of Pope Innocent IV Addressed to the Emperor of the Tartars”. Trans. Nun of Stanbook Abbey. *The Mongol Mission; Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. Ed. Christopher Dawson. New York: Shed and Ward, Inc, 1995. 73-76. Print.